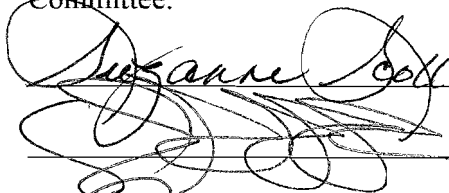


AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY OF CULTURAL FUSION, A STUDENT-LED  
EVENT AT GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY: A SITE FOR STUDENT  
LEADERSHIP, ACTIVISM, AND SCHOLARSHIP

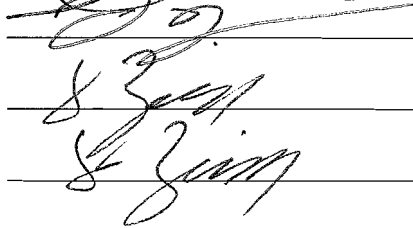
by

Jennifer A. Maloney  
A Thesis  
Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty  
of  
George Mason University  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
The Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Master of Arts  
Interdisciplinary Studies

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Date: April 27, 2012

Spring Semester 2012  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA

An Ethnographic Case Study of Cultural Fusion, a Student-Led Event at George Mason  
University:  
A Site for Student Leadership, Activism, and Scholarship

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am sincerely grateful for the invaluable guidance and advice of my committee members, Suzanne Scott, Shannon Portillo, and Toby Jenkins, and the support of my family, as I complete another step in my educational journey. I wish to recognize Ingrid Sandole-Staroste for her teaching and encouragement as this case study developed from a course-based research project to a thesis proposal, as well as remember Franki Rutherford, a dear fellow student who touched all of us who knew her. Finally, I wish to acknowledge the students who participated in this study—you are more inspiring than you know!

“Each person does what they can to make change” (the Archbishop Desmond Tutu, in videotaped comments before the Dalai Lama’s address on world peace in Washington, D.C., July 9, 2011).

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
List of Figures.....	iv
List of Tables.....	v
Abstract.....	vi
Chapter 1 Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2 Literature Review.....	18
Chapter 3 Methodology.....	49
Chapter 4 Findings and Analysis.....	66
Chapter 5 Summary and Conclusion.....	101
Appendix.....	115
Bibliography.....	119

## LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
1. Students playing giant chess during Cultural Fusion.....	4
2. A tradition during Cultural Fusion is trying on different cultural clothing.....	5
3. A tradition during Cultural Fusion is trying on different cultural clothing.....	5
4. Excerpt from a student self-portrait.....	94

## LIST OF TABLES

	Page
1. Data collection methods, participation, and time periods.....	55
2. Student volunteer responses to survey questions.....	85

## ABSTRACT

### AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY OF CULTURAL FUSION, A STUDENT-LED EVENT AT GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY: A SITE FOR STUDENT LEADERSHIP, ACTIVISM, AND SCHOLARSHIP

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George Mason University, 2012

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This thesis is an ethnographic case study of Cultural Fusion, an annual student-led event at George Mason University. Specifically, the author inquires about whether culture and gender factors influenced a group of culturally diverse students' participation in Cultural Fusion; how culturally diverse student leadership can effect change; and what such a study can add to overall college student development scholarship. In the process of researching and writing this thesis, the author conducted a literature search, interviews with university students and program staff, and a survey of the larger group of students who volunteered for Cultural Fusion. The author also sought and analyzed portraits, or personal statements, from Cultural Fusion's core group of student leaders. The author used an intersectional approach to connect a range of disciplines and fields of knowledge that touch upon college student leadership development—transformative educational practice, critical race theory, whiteness studies, and feminist approaches to leadership,

including cultural and multicultural leadership. Among other findings, the event's student leaders draw on the positive aspects of culture as a way to share students' identities and create a non-threatening space for bringing various groups and identities together. Cultural Fusion becomes a place for acceptance and learning, as distinguished from conditions portrayed in other campus environments, including the classroom.



## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In this ethnographic case study, I offer qualitative research on college student leadership development as it pertains to a small group of culturally diverse students at George Mason University (Mason). This university is located in Northern Virginia within the Washington, D.C. metropolitan region and is ranked as one of the most diverse universities in the nation. In terms of its enrollment, international students made up 5 percent (1,727), of its student population in fall 2010. The number of students overall who identify within ethnic, or racial, categories other than white grew from 9,881 in fall 2006 to nearly 12,000 by fall 2010—a 20 percent change over 5 years. By comparison, the number of students who identify as white American students decreased during this timeframe, from 16,468 in fall 2006 to 15,517 by fall 2010, a nearly negative 6 percent change over 5 years. This data serves as a snapshot of the ethnic and cultural diversity of the student body in which this case study took place; I will explore how students react and respond to such structural diversity in more detail later in this paper.

### **Purpose of Study and Contributions**

The purpose of my study is to understand student leadership development through the lenses of gender and cultural influences, given increasing numbers of both international students and other culturally diverse students on U.S. campuses. Specifically, I wanted to learn what constitutes student leadership as envisioned and

implemented by students; to explore the intersections of gender and culture as these relate and contribute to student leadership development; and to contribute to discussions on action-oriented student leadership development, as viewed through feminist and cultural leadership studies as well as literature on critical race theory and whiteness. I chose a case study approach in order to focus on the work of a core group of students responsible for implementing Cultural Fusion—which by 2010 had become one of Mason’s major student-run and student-focused events—as well as to have the opportunity to attend and to participate in some of the event’s activities and to conduct interviews with university staff familiar with these students’ efforts. In this thesis I explore themes raised in earlier coursework-related research—what motivates student leaders of Cultural Fusion and why it is important to them; the action-oriented nature of student leadership, and students’ perspectives on how nonacademic activities differ from what they may experience in the classroom.

In learning more about students’ goals for Cultural Fusion and the environment they hoped to create, I also gained knowledge about their classroom experiences, and some views on the relationship between academic and non-academic experiences for culturally diverse students. Like the students in this case study, I too believe that Cultural Fusion’s achievements should be shared and promoted. In that regard, I presented this case study as a work-in-progress at the Society for Educating Women’s November 2011 Diversity in Education conference, and connect feedback from that experience with my findings and analysis in Chapter 4. Additionally, I include a discussion of indirect outcomes from Cultural Fusion, including the development of a living learning

community open to both international and non-international students, increased University staff resources dedicated to opportunities for student leadership, and monthly “International Cafe” events. As a result, student leaders’ ability to recognize student needs beyond involvement with a particular event is also significant to a discussion of student leadership development.

In broader terms, I hope that this study will illuminate practices that promote cultural interactions among all students, add to discussions regarding identity and how different cultures co-exist, and potentially provide a context for what may be happening on other campuses with growing culturally diverse student populations. Finally, I hope this case study contributes to Mason’s *Ethnography of Diversity* effort as it strives to be a national model of joint faculty-student research on the topic of diversity at Mason and offer recommendations about how institutions might better realize their goals vis-à-vis student diversity.

### **What is Cultural Fusion?**

Since 2008, Cultural Fusion has been an annual student-planned and led event at Mason that brings students together to learn about, meet, and interact with the diversity of cultures that exists at Mason.<sup>1</sup> The program was the idea of two of the students in this case study, who while “chatting at a local coffee shop came up with the idea of creating an event in which diversity was reflected in a lively way.”<sup>2</sup> Their goal was to not only celebrate culture but to create a cultural immersion experience, and to supplement the

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, the term *Cultural Fusion* is used to describe the event over the course of its existence, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> <http://news.gmu.edu/articles/4808>

university's International Week activities typically held in the spring. As a result, these two students launched Cultural Fusion as a single-day field day event on the university's main (Fairfax) campus in fall 2008 that offered various cultural sporting games for students, such as Tai Chi demonstrations, pick-up soccer games, and chess played on gigantic boards, as pictured below.



Figure 1: Students playing giant chess during Cultural Fusion. Retrieved March 31, 2012 from: <http://news.gmu.edu/articles/962>.

The two student co-founders, both women, continued the event with a similar format in fall 2009, adding performances, demonstrations, and activities such as student organization information tables (referred to as a Table Fair) and the opportunity for students to try on clothing representative of various cultures and have their pictures taken, as these photos illustrate.



Figures 2 and 3: A tradition during Cultural Fusion is trying on different cultural clothing. Retrieved March 31, 2012, from: <http://news.gmu.edu/articles/962> and <http://news.gmu.edu/articles/4808>.

The 2009 event attracted more than 400 students. Also in the 2009 academic year, Cultural Fusion added a one-day event on Mason's Prince William, Virginia campus during the spring 2010 semester.

In 2010 students renamed the event Cultural Fusion Fairfax 2010 and expanded it to 4 weeks of activities. Week One featured a kick-off, sports, and performances; Week Two featured fashion and food across cultures; Week Three, a film and art festival; and Week Four, a concert and closing ceremonies.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the third year of Cultural Fusion represented a much more ambitious effort, requiring substantial student resources in terms of their commitment to and development of organization, planning, marketing, and management skills—in general, providing leadership. A University Life Office representative credited student leaders with the event's success: "The students who worked on this event got it right — Mason's diversity is even more valuable when we bring students,

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<sup>3</sup> <http://aaas.gmu.edu/2010culturalfusioncalendar>

faculty and staff together to share and learn from that diversity.”<sup>4</sup> As one Mason student who was interviewed during the event put it: “I’ve seen cultural fusions before, but Cultural Fusion Fairfax 2010 truly portrayed the potential that a small, dynamic group of students can achieve.”<sup>5</sup> A one-day Cultural Fusion event on the Prince William campus to coincide with Mason’s annual International Week occurred on April 14, 2011.

### **Prior Course-related Research**

Cultural Fusion was suggested to me as an ethnographic research site by one of the event’s student co-founders, a Turkish-American graduate student, who previously had taken Mason’s course on Feminist Approaches to Social Research, and its follow-up Gender Research Project. The intent of my initial study, as part of individual student research for the above courses, was to gauge the importance of an event like Cultural Fusion to the Mason community by learning how it relates to, reaches out to, and engages with students. I envisioned a potential outcome of the initial study would be the continuation and growth of culturally-focused events within the university to further cultural awareness and understanding among Mason students. In terms of my own background, I note that I do not fit the more typical graduate student profile; I am a white American woman of Puerto Rican and Polish cultural heritage, who is a part-time student pursuing a graduate degree nearly 30 years after obtaining my undergraduate degree. I am fortunate to have lived part of my adult life in Panama and to have traveled throughout

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<sup>4</sup> <http://news.gmu.edu/articles/4808>

<sup>5</sup> <http://news.gmu.edu/articles/4808>

Latin America; that period helped lead to my later educational path into women and gender studies with particular interest in issues related to cultural diversity, globalization, and underrepresented groups.

Findings from my course-related research conducted during fall 2010 and spring 2011 indicated that women students, and in particular women international students, played a primary role in Cultural Fusion's leadership. For example, women outnumbered men three to one in the small group of core student leaders (with two women international students), and women outnumbered men seven to none at the committee level beyond the core group of student leadership for Cultural Fusion's 2010 event. The core group was responsible for overall planning and event implementation. Of the larger group of nearly 200 students who volunteered in some capacity for Cultural Fusion Fairfax 2010, women students outnumbered men students by two to one, not including additional women and men student members of the various student associations that also supported the event. Cultural Fusion student organizers estimate that at least half of the women and men students in the larger group who volunteered with Cultural Fusion are international students. In another tier of leadership, seven women students served as committee chairpersons. Of the larger group of student volunteers, examples of leadership ranged from representing student organizations at Cultural Fusion's Table Fair, facilitating a performance or actually performing, and acting as emcees.

Each of Cultural Fusion's student leaders expressed as one of their goals for Cultural Fusion to find commonalities among Mason's diverse students—to see the similarities as well as the differences in order to foster a more inclusive campus

atmosphere. They contrasted the need for Cultural Fusion with the many Mason student organizations that are nationally or ethnically identified, and pointed out that while such organizations do serve to bring students together, they also maintain separateness.

Cultural Fusion's student leadership strived to bring all students together.

Also from earlier research, student leadership emerged as a critical ingredient for Cultural Fusion in all of its stages. A definition of what leadership meant to those students most involved in running Cultural Fusion also emerged. Overall, students emphasized the value of Cultural Fusion's diverse leadership, meaning that those involved represented various cultural backgrounds and that both international students and American students were involved. Although not planned for, this diverse leadership was cited as a factor that could encourage students' participation in events such as Cultural Fusion. As one student interviewee stated: "If you have a diverse leadership, you're doing outreach, and people feel comfortable and they feel more accepted, even if you don't belong to any of their groups."

### **Research Questions**

In this thesis, I investigate further the key findings from other coursework-related research. Specifically, I inquire about whether culture and gender factors influenced this group of culturally diverse students' participation in Cultural Fusion (as an example of a major university extra-curricular/non-academic event); how culturally diverse student leadership can effect change; and what can a study that focuses on students' personal experiences and backgrounds, specifically culture and gender influences on activities



expressed as action-oriented leadership, add to overall college student development research, and perhaps higher education in general.

### **Feminist Methodology**

This case study attempts to emulate the goals of feminist case studies, which according to Reinharz (1992) serve three major purposes: “to analyze the change in a phenomenon over time, to analyze the significance of a phenomenon for future events, and to analyze the relation among parts of a phenomenon” (p. 164). Specifically, attention to students’ voices, and the language they used to describe their experiences as Mason students, was a primary focus. I continued to use a multi-method feminist approach to obtain and relate students’ observations and perspectives on the importance they attach to Cultural Fusion and their participation in it. College students are often asked to complete surveys and participate in other quantitative-based instruments to measure various aspects of their college experience. While useful, such studies do not include students’ personal narratives that help to explain, for example, what factors may contribute to student employment while in school, the decision to live on or off campus or to join a particular organization, or why a student might refrain from participating fully in a certain class. “Talking and listening to students remain uncommon in institutional research” (Harper, 2007, p. 55). Given this acknowledgement, the student voices in this case study will help balance other data on college students that “almost exclusively through quantitative methods provides an incomplete assessment picture that lacks depth, complexity, personal accountability, and voice” (Harper, 2007, p. 55).

Overall, my goal as a feminist researcher was to ensure that the process in which this case study was conducted as well as the findings and knowledge produced were direct reflections of students' input. The work for this thesis, which continued from course-related research beginning in the fall of 2010, took place during the summer and fall 2011 semesters on Mason's Fairfax campus.

### **Relevant Literature**

Although much research supports the need for educators and administrators to employ leadership that responds to a multicultural and diverse student body (Obiakor, 2006; Gardiner, 2004; Bustamante, 2009; Adams (ed.), 1991), there seems to be less research that addresses student leadership development within a multicultural and diverse campus environment. Research also shows that college represents the first time most students will have the opportunity to meet racially diverse others, and be educated and live in a racially diverse environment (Rankin & Reason, 2005; Wilds, 2000). Literature also suggests that where there is such structural diversity, the frequency and quality of intergroup interactions can lead to meaningful diversity experiences, through both informal interactional diversity (outside of the classroom) and classroom diversity (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002). Further evidence of the benefits of racial and ethnic diversity in colleges and universities relates to students' opportunities "to experiment with new ideas, new relationships, and new roles" that can enhance identity development (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002, p. 335) in contrast to the experience of attending college in a more homogenous environment in one's hometown for example. A 1999-2000 study of minorities in higher education also reported that students'

“interacting with diverse ideas and people while in college encourages students to continue these behaviors throughout their lifetimes” (Wilds, 2000, p. 62).

Although foreign, or international, students are generally considered to enrich the cultural diversity of the educational experience for American students as well as enhance the reputation of U.S. universities as world-class institutions, other racially and culturally diverse students also contribute to this experience. These would include immigrant students, students whose are not native English speakers, and students who identify themselves as other than white American—*African American, Native American, Asian American, Hispanic American, Non Resident Alien, Two or More, and Pacific Islander*. Adding in the *White American* and *Race not Reported* categories, these represent all of the categories in the university’s Official Census Student Enrollment by Demographic.<sup>6</sup> In order to distinguish these groups of students as well as international students from the population of white American students, I refer to the former collectively as ethnically or culturally diverse students. I recognize that white American students are not excluded from possessing culture (see discussion of whiteness in Chapter 2); my only purpose here is to differentiate for discussion all other student ethnicities from the often majority white student enrollment found at many U.S. universities.

Among the research in college student development, a number of higher education studies focus on how administrators and educators, as school leaders, prepare for multicultural leadership in administrator preparation programs. At the same time less is understood about the qualities and influences students bring in developing leadership

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<sup>6</sup> [http://irr.gmu.edu/off\\_enrl/](http://irr.gmu.edu/off_enrl/)

skills as they too work in diverse and multicultural student environments. The recognition that "...students may be different in terms of more than the sociological typologies of class, race, and gender... [and that] consideration should be given to an individual's national origin, native language..." (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2004, p. 27), among other differences can also apply to a discussion of student leaders' interactions with other students, not just as a consideration for administrators and educators. As Gardiner and Enomoto (2004) also point out, multicultural leadership recognizes and values the contributions of all who create school and community environments. Clearly, this would include student leaders.

According to Dugan, Komives, and Segar (2008):

Leadership research in which college students serve as the primary population of interest is a relatively recent phenomenon. An estimated 65% of research on leadership development interventions conducted over the last 100 years used undergraduate students as participants, yet few of these studies were designed to directly serve the college student population and did not interpret findings in the context of student development literature. (p. 480)

This is not to say that qualitative-based work does not exist to serve educators and students who wish to learn about leadership. For example, in the book *Exploring Leadership*, Komives, Lucas, and McMahon (2007) clearly focus on helping college students develop their own philosophies and practices of leadership, with useful input from students who are actually engaged in leadership activities. Included in their teaching on student leadership is approaching change through the concept of multicultural

organizational development. “This process emphasizes the full participation of its members from all cultural and social groups and a commitment to end all forms of social oppression that may exist within the organization that blocks the meaningful, inclusive involvement of all members” (Komives, Lucas & McMahon, 2007, p. 269). In Chapter 4 I discuss findings related to Cultural Fusion’s student leaders’ efforts in working with a contingent of individual student volunteers, student organizations, staff, faculty, and administrators to produce this event.

Further, I consider feminist research on leadership in general, leadership within higher education, and, tangentially related to leadership, higher education and democratic classrooms. For example, Kellerman and Rhode (Eds.) (2007) take a big picture look at the issue of women's underrepresentation in leadership roles in sectors including government, industry, and academia. They work from the premise that the underrepresentation of women leaders is a problem in society and bring to light that more research is needed to document and study the limited leadership roles women play in higher education. Case studies such as this one may contribute to understanding how student leadership development relates to existing research on women and leadership, if nothing else than to include students as a category of research pertaining to leadership in higher education.

Given this case study’s overall focus on structural diversity and student efforts to create awareness and foster participation from a multicultural standpoint, I also consider critical race theory, and whiteness and white privilege studies as frameworks to analyze students’ perspectives and other data collected related to their work with Cultural Fusion.

## Diversity at George Mason University

I find Mason to be an example of how attention to student diversity in both enrollment and programming within U.S. universities has become more the norm than the phenomenon. The Common Data Set initiative, which solicits student enrollment statistics from the higher education community "...to improve the quality and accuracy of information provided to all involved in a student's transition into higher education," recognizes that many factors go into one's decision about which university to attend, and that data students submit about themselves provides important considerations for their adaptability and success.<sup>7</sup> Universities themselves are also by ranked by a diversity index, which is based on a formula that produces an index ranging from 0.0 to 1.0, with numbers closer to 1.0 indicating a more diverse student population.<sup>8</sup> According to the U.S. News and World Report, which sponsors these and other college ranking studies, Mason's diversity index is 0.53, making it tied for the third highest such ranking among major universities in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area.<sup>9</sup>

According to its President: "George Mason University recognizes the impact diversity and inclusion have on every aspect of our mission....Consistent with the university's commitment to embrace diversity, Mason strives to increase the broad

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.commondataset.org/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/rankings/national-universities/campus-ethnic-diversity>

<sup>9</sup> <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/rankings/national-universities/campus-ethnic-diversity> Two universities—the University of Maryland Baltimore Campus and Johns Hopkins University had slightly higher diversity indices. Four others, all in Washington, D.C. had lower diversity indices. These were: the George Washington University, American University, Georgetown University, and the Catholic University of America.

spectrum of perspectives available on campus, which are critical to our mission of entrepreneurship, excellence, and leadership.”<sup>10</sup> In part this commitment is evident in the university’s growing diversity-related academic program offerings. Efforts to accommodate student diversity at the university can also be found in its various student associations and organizations and its commitment to providing student resources. This effort includes funding and other programming assistance for American Indian/Alaskan Native, Black, Caribbean, Ethiopian, Filipino, Hispanic, Indian, Korean, Pakistan, Pride Alliance, and Vietnamese student associations, as well as other groups such as the Psychology Students Diversity Affairs Committee. In addition, Mason diversity-related student resources include the Peer Empowerment Program, which provides peer support and training to Mason’s diverse student population; the Student Transition Empowerment Program, established to enhance the recruitment, satisfaction and retention of an intentionally diverse undergraduate student body; and the new Center for International Student Access, which offers first year academic programs and experiences for international students coming to Mason to assist them as they enter a culturally inclusive learning environment.<sup>11</sup> Other diversity-related initiatives at Mason occur through the Office of Diversity Programs and Services within the University Life program, as well as: the Diversity Research and Action Center, which began as a pilot project to investigate issues and concerns related to public and private sector organizations and agencies in Northern Virginia that work with ethnically and culturally diverse groups; the Diversity

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<sup>10</sup> <http://diversity.gmu.edu>

<sup>11</sup> <http://cisa.gmu.edu/>

Research Group, which consists of university faculty, staff, students, and administrators interested in the impact of diversity on higher education; and the Multicultural Research and Resource Center, which among other things, provides research on intercultural and cross-cultural inclusion, and collaborates with faculty on curriculum development that reflects the multicultural society within the community.<sup>12</sup>

Mason's mission statement demonstrates the importance of diversity and [multicultural] leadership not only through its programs and services but also through its mission to "...educate the new generation of leaders for the 21<sup>st</sup> century men and women capable of shaping a global community with vision, justice, and clarity."<sup>13</sup>

### **Limitations of the Study**

In this study, I do not address students' cultural identities within a larger theoretical framework in order to focus on the personal influences of culture and gender on student leadership development. The study also does not attempt to study the reasons for self-segregation among various culturally or ethnically-identified student groups—seemingly a common occurrence at Mason—other than to shed light on students' observations of and reactions to these situations as they relate to their involvement with Cultural Fusion. While research has been conducted on cultural adaptation processes (psychological and otherwise) of international students in the U.S. as these affect academic achievement, this study does not intend to enter this discussion. However, this case study does relate how student leaders perceive their ability to become involved in

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<sup>12</sup> <http://diversity.gmu.edu/diversity-resources.php>

<sup>13</sup> <http://provost.gmu.edu/purpose.html>



the university experience, and specifically in Cultural Fusion, beyond their academic goals. Other limitations are that this is one case, in one location, with a limited number of participants.

### **Organization of the Thesis**

This chapter presented an overview of the case study—its purpose, earlier related research, research questions, methodology, relevant literature, diversity-related efforts at the university where this case study is situated, and limitations. The remainder of my thesis is organized as: Chapter 2, a literature review; Chapter 3, my methodology; Chapter 4, the results of my data collection and analysis; and Chapter 5, my summary and conclusions.

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

...when theories of leadership are produced and disseminated as scientific truth, and when these theories equate leadership with a certain kind of rugged masculine individualism, the leadership of women and people of color remains understudied and is treated as a kind of organizational oxymoron. (Kellerman & Rhode (Eds.), 2007, p. 370)

This quotation, along with Shaun Harper's observation that "Student experiences are far too rich and instructive to overlook" (Harper, 2007, p. 66), inspired my goals for this case study. I hoped to contribute to college student leadership development work by considering influences of culture and gender on culturally diverse students, and to advance the need for more qualitative-based inquiry of college students. Given the need for educators and administrators to employ leadership that responds to increasingly multicultural and diverse campus environments, I argue that such an environment requires, perhaps demands, innovative leadership from educators *and* students that can reach out to and engage students across the lines of ethnicity, gender, class, race, and status of acculturation. Such leadership strengthens existing university-supported events and activities that complement students' academic work and add to the overall college experience, while also promoting a diverse student leadership. Although much research

on leadership in general exists, the process of how one's identity as a leader develops remains an area for increased study.

I use an intersectional approach to connect a range of disciplines and fields of knowledge that touch upon college student leadership development—transformative educational practice, critical race theory, whiteness studies, and feminist approaches to leadership, including cultural and multicultural leadership. The following discussion considers how these areas are interwoven and often difficult to separate, in much the same way issues related to gender, race/ethnicity, culture, class, etc. are interconnected. As my findings in Chapter 4 will show, Cultural Fusion's student leaders provided many insights and observations that touched on each of these areas.

As mentioned in the introduction, substantial numbers of studies have been conducted on learning how college affects students (Harper, 2007) and this continues to be a growing area of research for many who work with college students on a daily basis, such as educators in the expanding fields of student affairs, student programs, and university life. In general, these studies have focused on better understanding how students experience campus and university life (both inside and outside the classroom), identifying areas for student funding, bringing about supportive environments for student development, and enhancing students' overall success in these environments. Much statistical data has been collected and analyzed as the result of quantitative assessments of student surveys and other measurement-based techniques that look at, for example, student demographic data, student employment rates, and enrollment at 4-year versus 2-year institutions and public versus private institutions.

Over the past 50 years, thousands, perhaps even tens of thousands, of studies have been conducted with college student samples. Only a subset of this massive body of scholarship is actually concerned with estimating the net or unique impact of the postsecondary experience on student. ... Yet, even if one considers only the research on college impact on students...the next two decades may be a time of unprecedented advances in our understanding of how college affects students. (Pascarella, 2006, p. 508)

And although this research has “made substantial contributions to our understanding of the impact of postsecondary education on students who had been previously ignored” (Pascarella, 2006, p. 51), such as students of color, those who have long participated in this research recognize that quantitative studies only give part of the picture. Given evidence that suggests “that the academic and out-of-class experiences that influence intellectual and personal development during college differ along such dimensions as race/ethnicity” (p. 514), it follows that future research should develop a clearer understanding of the unique experiences of students from diverse groups that enhance their college years. Here then is an argument for qualitative inquiry and its focus on understanding and being “more sensitive to the influential nuances of student academic and nonacademic experiences during college” (p. 516).

In addition, while some college student development research clearly relates to how college experiences can impact one’s life beyond college, such as post-degree earnings and employment outcomes, Pascarella (2006) reports that nearly no attention has been given to studying “the long-term impacts of specific within-college academic and

nonacademic experiences” (p. 516) because much of this has yet to be documented. This helps justify the qualitative approach I employed in this case study, which while focused on students’ experiences leading a nonacademic event, also provided insights on these students’ academic, or classroom, experiences.

Other researchers agree that learning what matters most to college students by using exclusively quantitative methods “provides an incomplete assessment picture that lacks depth, complexity, personal accountability, and voice” (Harper, 2007, p. 56). Reporting that “talking and listening to students remain uncommon in institutional research” (Harper, 2007, p. 57), Harper argues for a phenomenological account in qualitative research that describes what participants have experienced, how they have experienced it, and how it makes sense to them. I align this with the goals of feminist methodology and the self-portraiture method that speak to the contributions of expressions of individual insight and experience to knowledge production, particularly for marginalized or underrepresented groups. Harper agrees that individual student perspectives obtained qualitatively can add to college student assessment and program enhancement and notes that these provide additional indicators of educational impact and can potentially be replicated. He offers phenomenology as one possible qualitative approach, and includes case study and ethnographic methods as others. By combining the latter two, I intend for this thesis to also contribute to the body of work on college student development, and specifically college student leadership development. “College students are arguably best positioned to offer personalized data and perspectives that help shed light on the magnitude of how they were affected by something in their learning

environment, participation in a program or activity, or interactions with faculty and student affairs educators” (p. 58).

### **Social Change and Relational Leadership Models**

The social change model of leadership development was designed specifically for college students and is credited with influencing collegiate leadership programs nationwide (Dugan, Komives, & Segar, 2008). This model emphasizes increasing the student leader’s level of self-knowledge and her/his ability to work collaboratively. The findings of Dugan et al. regarding college student leadership development are useful because, although obtained through quantitative measures, they link student leadership to social responsibility and creating change. Their findings also discuss how domestic culture and social identity have the potential to influence one’s understanding of and approach to leadership. They use the social change method of leadership development, designed specifically for college students, that “situates leadership as inherently tied to social responsibility and manifested in creating change that benefits the common good” (Dugan et al., 2008, p. 477). Being able to work collaboratively is a key outcome and one of the critical values identified that are necessary to effect change. This model explores leadership development through seven critical values (consciousness of self, congruence, commitment, collaboration, common purpose, controversy with civility, and citizenship) and how they interact at the individual, group, and societal levels. I compare Dugan et al.’s definition of leadership—“a process through which social change is achieved” (2008, p. 489) —with student leaders’ goals for Cultural Fusion, which include breaking down barriers and creating space for learning and understanding, to grow in terms of its

outreach and in terms of what it offers, and to develop Cultural Fusion as a model that can be used by students at other universities.

In a text that speaks directly to students, Komives, Lucas, and McMahon (2007) emphasize a commitment to the inclusion of all of the group's members, their diversity and individuality, as prerequisites to working toward a common goal and bringing about positive change. They instruct that leadership is "a relational and ethical process of people together attempting to accomplish positive change" (p. 29). There are five concepts that provide structure to one's leadership—purpose, inclusion, empowerment, ethics, and process. The intent to want positive change needs to be well communicated to all members of the group. "...how the group goes about being a group, remaining a group, and accomplishing a group's purposes..." (p. 103), is a reflection of the process of the recruitment of its members and how they interact with each other and their commitment to effecting change. Among the other processes that occur within this overall structure are collaboration, reflection, feedback, community building, and what Komives, Lucas and McMahon refer to as "meaning making" (p. 104). A key consideration within all of these processes is to keep the group working and learning together, a major challenge Cultural Fusion's student leaders when considering that the 2010 month-long event involved many weeks of planning and coordination given the participation of various committees, student organizations, offices and departments, and more than a hundred student volunteers. Anyone who wished to be involved was welcome.

As discussed in Chapter 4, this relational model of leadership aptly describes the process Cultural Fusion’s student leadership employed—in fact, it seemed to come naturally to them—that also reflected these students’ concern for their fellow students, recognition of what diversity at Mason can offer, commitment to creating a space for cultural awareness and understanding, and desire to see these efforts continue beyond their own involvement not only at Mason but on other campuses as well. Further, the goals these students set out to accomplish resonate with, as Juana Bordas (2007) expresses it, the *spirit* of leadership lived—a reference to acknowledging the forces that unite us that cause us to center on the collective rather than individual—drawing from their backgrounds and personal experiences as my findings chapter will show.

### **Reflections on Transformative Educational Practices**

Paulo Freire, who many consider a leader in educational reform thinking and practice, values highly the relevance of educators’ and students’ backgrounds to not only individual growth but as the impetus for societal structural change. Like feminist research, Freire’s work is inclusive in that he is connected to and understands and appreciates cultural identity. Although he does not focus specifically on gender, his own personal experience with poverty—living among the rural poor in Brazil— influenced his life’s work wherein he became very cognizant of the disconnections between elitist educational practices and the real lives of the working class, and the effects of socioeconomics on education. His past influenced him to promote the capacity for both educators and students to teach and learn from each other and to recognize the value of informal (non classroom) experiences and “knowledge derived from life experience....”



(Freire, 2001, p. 62). He identifies the need to address the balance of power between the haves and the have-nots, the colonizer and the oppressed, and to resist dehumanization in a true, liberatory educational system. His work encourages us to recognize and utilize our capacity first for ingenuous curiosity (based on lived experiences) to epistemological curiosity as the basis for true education. The notion that being human allows us to make history out of possibility is directly related to feminist work that seeks to bring the histories of women to light and for those who are marginalized. “The world is not finished. It is always in the process of becoming” (Freire, 2001, p. 72).

Also similar to feminist research, Freire’s work combines learning and activism, explaining, “that education is open-ended scientific formation because people are conditioned but not determined by their circumstances” (2001, p. 12). This is relevant to Cultural Fusion, which encompasses student work while within the educational environment and considers their experiences on a daily basis. According to Freire, education is one’s formation. By extension, I consider universities to be sites where students, bringing that which has already influenced them, and by interactions with diverse others, are exposed to ideas and teachings that help them determine who they will become.

Freire also challenges researchers to realize that “whoever really observes does from a given point of view” (Freire, 2001, p. 22). To not acknowledge the other’s point of view calls into question that our position is ethically grounded. I think this is also what feminist scholars like DuBois, DeVault, and Reinharz espouse—that truly acknowledging and listening to others, ensuring their voices are heard for they are without putting

forward our own intentions or beliefs, and respecting one another, brings true knowledge and is where ethics are grounded, and where change can occur. Further, Freire speaks directly to feminist research methodology when he calls for personal reflection, making connections between what is being taught and read to what is happening in the world and being "...open and capable of producing something that does not yet exist" (2001, p. 35). This is the objective of research. Theory needs to be connected with practice because together this allows for critical reflection. In this case study, theory also needs to be connected to what students actually experience in the classroom because, as my findings later show, this is an area of some disconnect in terms of educators and classmates not being aware of and acknowledging, culturally speaking, what international students and other minority students can contribute to a U.S. university experience.

Freire's work relates to the purpose of my case study best when he states: "As women and men, we are not simply determined by facts and events. At the same time, we are subject to genetic, cultural, social, class, sexual, and historical conditionings that mark us profoundly and that constitute for a center of reference" (2001, p. 91). This would include the acknowledgement that history for some includes struggles against colonization and efforts to overcome mistreatments and assimilate within the larger (often dominant white) population, such as that experienced by native Indian, African American, and Mexican communities, for example. If leadership is grounded in listening, then it is the recognition and acceptance of and respect for our differences that has to be part of the picture. "To accept and respect what is different is one of those virtues without which listening cannot take place" (Freire, 2001, p. 108).

Like Freire, bell hooks is cognizant of the role of the educational system in understanding and working within the intersections of race, ethnicity, and gender and she addresses this from a feminist and critical race standpoint. “Despite the contemporary focus on multiculturalism...particularly in education, there is not nearly enough practical discussion of ways classroom settings can be transformed so that the learning experience is inclusive” (hooks, 1994, p. 35). hooks points to students’ experiences within the university that may be affected by “biases that uphold and maintain white supremacy, imperialism, sexism, and racism [that] have distorted education” (1999a, p. 237). hooks also argues, “The call for recognition of cultural diversity “has been a necessary revolution—one that seeks to restore life to a corrupt and dying academy” (1999a, p. 237). hooks also agrees with Freire when she says:

If the effort to respect and honor the social reality and experiences of groups in this society who are nonwhite is to be reflected in a pedagogical process, then as teachers—on all levels, from elementary to university settings—we must acknowledge that our style of teaching needs to change. (hooks, 1994, p. 35)

### **Feminist Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Whiteness Studies**

Given the make-up of Mason’s student body and the make-up of those students who led or volunteered to work on Cultural Fusion, this case study calls for an intersectional approach that links theories on race/ethnicity, feminism, and leadership within higher education. As noted previously, not one of the core group of Cultural Fusion’s student leaders defined themselves as white American. In addition, a sample of Cultural Fusion’s nearly 100 student volunteers described themselves as identifying with

one or more ethnicities. Because this case study was unable to obtain demographic data on the many students who attended Cultural Fusion's activities, it was difficult to determine which students Cultural Fusion most appealed to. Student leaders, however, acknowledged that many of those who participated in Cultural Fusion were students of color. They were also of the opinion that some white American students might not participate because of their perceived lack of culture. These students' opinions and observations regarding white culture help frame the discussions that follow because Cultural Fusion, as an event, occurs not only within a white dominant U.S. institution, but also within a larger, white hegemonic society.

Feminist theory, particularly that pertaining to feminist methodology, helps unravel the notion of culture as a collective identity. hooks (1994) in particular, relates the importance of understanding others when she gives the example of accepted feminist theory as "when students, most of whom are female, come to Women's Studies classes and read what they are told is feminist theory only to feel that what they are reading has no meaning, or when understood in no way connects to lived realities beyond the classroom" (pp. 64-65). I interpret hooks' observation as pertaining to students of color who are taught Western (read *white*) feminism to which they are unable to wholly relate. In pursuing this case study, I found that by using feminist methodology I was able to learn from others' actual lived experiences so as to re-frame my own understanding of feminism. I re-discovered the importance of theory "as necessary practice with a holistic framework of liberatory activism" (p. 69), through the voices of fellow students. Mohanty echoes this sentiment when she reflects on the way she experiences her

multicultural identity—an Indian citizen by birth and a U.S. resident who travels back and forth between these culturally different worlds. She critiques the western educational system for promoting a western-influenced, pro-capitalist feminism, which neglects acknowledgement and contributions of a more-representative global nature. In my findings chapter, I consider how Cultural Fusion student leaders' cultural and multicultural identities, even within (or perhaps despite?) a western, white dominant educational system, influenced their commitment to this event.

Combining feminist and critical race perspectives with educational goals, Janell Hobson (2006) challenges us to look at Women's Studies in terms of how its curricula includes "the increasing presence of multiracial and multinational students in college classrooms" (p. 96), who by extension are also part of a university community even when engaged outside of the classroom. Like Freire, Hobson (2006) believes in the transformative potential of education that draws upon the relational position between teacher and student, especially when using theory and practice to raise a global feminist consciousness. As she points out, "Once different communities can engage and theorize across differences, we may begin to realize that we all have a stake in each other's struggles and in each other's political movements" (p. 105).

I also found Andersen's and Collins' (2004) discussion of the intersectionality of race, class, and gender critical to better understanding environments of diverse populations. Diversity encompasses many factors—among them are culture, nationality/ethnicity, gender, age, race, and sexual identity. Regardless of which factor is used to distinguish one diverse group from another, all can be "defined as 'other'; that is,

they are perceived through dominant group values (and) treated in exclusionary ways” (Andersen & Collins, 2004). Diversity, then, constructs how one group is different from another, and in more broad terms, how all diverse groups are different from the dominant group. In this case study, the comparison would be between culturally diverse students, and white American students and the university power structure of faculty and administration. Adding on other difference indicators, such as students for whom English is not their native language, only serves to set these students further apart from the dominant group.

### **Reflections on Women and Leadership**

In her forward to *Women and Leadership*, Sandra Day O’Connor notes, “that gender is part of what informs female leaders’ values and priorities” (2007, p.xv). Individual authors discuss the status of and environment for women’s leadership from judicial, political, international, educational, and business/financial sectors, providing a deeper understanding of the context of mainstream leadership and challenges facing women as they strive to make inroads and assume effective leadership positions in a patriarchal society. To perform effectively in an increasingly competitive and multicultural environment, workplaces need individuals with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and styles of leadership. As it relates to this case study, Cultural Fusion student leaders are training for the future and opening further the door to diverse leadership. This is especially important given women’s and minority groups’ historical and current underrepresentation in leadership positions in all key U.S. sectors.

The book raises the question: do women lead differently than men? This concern with gendered influences on leadership stems from the context of heavily gendered conceptions of human life, including leadership (p. 20). Characteristics of female leadership include more collaborative behavior, concern for colleagues and subordinates, and less competition for status. There are also different approaches whether one is conducting “task leadership” or “expressive leadership.” Another factor to consider is a leader’s commitment to some form of situated knowledge that shapes and limits what she/he knows, or how one views the world. For example, when women think back, who and what do they think back to (Kellerman & Rhode (Eds.), 2007, p. 78)? What experiences, relationships influenced them? My intention in requesting that Cultural Fusion’s student leaders provide student portraits was to learn more about their backgrounds and what may have influenced them to work on this event. For example, did, as Kellerman and Rhode (Eds.) note, “unreal loyalties” (p. 84), such as pride of nationality, religion, college, family, or sex play a role? Obtaining gendered and cultural perspectives can contribute to an understanding of leadership. Universities, especially those with diverse student populations, are prime training grounds for encouraging, supporting, and strengthening opportunities for student leadership—for tomorrow’s multicultural leaders. What these students bring to the table helps to shape their university experiences, both within and outside of the classroom.

While gendered approaches to leadership do exist, not all are inherent. Evidence suggests that men are also moving toward more collaborative and relational leadership. Frameworks such as positionality theory may “help us rethink organizational practices

and leadership,” considering “a host of conditions and factors shaping leadership styles, approaches, and beliefs, which include social class, sexual orientation, family circumstances, professional status, educational level, and so on” (Kezar & Lester, 2010, p. 179). The Center for Creative Leadership’s 2007 survey of 247 senior executives, in which the respondents were 87 percent male, reported collaboration as central to their work as leaders and a key leadership quality. “The trend most often mentioned is the shift from an autocratic style to one that’s more participative. Leaders predict that future success will depend on the ability to be collaborative and to focus on the team rather than on the individual” (*10 Trends: A study of senior executives’ views on the future*, 2007, p. 13). While nearly all of the executives surveyed believed organizational leaders must collaborate to succeed, only about half considered their organization’s leaders as skilled collaborators, indicating an area for improvement to prepare future leaders. Such analysis also resonates with the relational model of leadership described previously and its focus on inclusiveness, in particular involving the participation of most of the group and empowering others’ voices to ensure fairness in decision-making and using collaborative practices.

Additionally, diversity as illustrated by nationality/ethnicity/cultural heritage/race—whether referring to leaders in the boardroom or on a college campus—can not only bring rich diversity to leadership development but also influence opinions and decision-making. For example, Kellerman and Rhode (Eds.) (2007) make the point, when referring to women judges, that diversity on the bench affects public perceptions of fairness and a diverse bench enables members to influence each other (p.185). Anita



Hill's description of the "representative perspective frame" (p.186) tells us that "gender, racial, and ethnic experiences influence perspectives and worldviews," with applicability beyond the judicial bench. The authors also explore what women can teach men about leadership, such as women's adaptability—being able to pull people together, not rushing into decisions, listening, and the ability to nurture towards collective responsibility (p. 321).

These descriptions about the advantages of considering diversity in leadership contexts parallel Komives, Lucas, and McMahon's (year) discussion of the benefits that result from relational leadership. In particular, relational leadership has a renewal component that develops from shared responsibility among its membership. Shared responsibility begins with leadership that seeks to connect members with one another (building community) so that "...each person feel(s) like a part of the whole, a part of something bigger than herself or himself" (2007, p. 315). From recruitment to committee work to task implementation to follow-up—relational leadership, as exemplified by Cultural Fusion's student leaders, tries to involve as many as possible in the group's goals and activities, so that everyone is a stakeholder and everyone benefits. This also resonates with Bordas' recognition that the strength of the community hinges on the "we," not on the "I." In other words, those who wish to contribute are welcome to do so, knowing that a shared responsibility approach can strengthen the group as a whole, elicit favorable outcomes (fewer surprises), and provide encouraging feedback to maintain the organization restore it.

## **Reflections on Cultural and Multicultural Leadership**

Kellerman and Rhode (Eds.) (2007) and Bordas (2007) point to the need for new and creative approaches to leadership that are supportive of the interconnectedness of race/ethnicity, gender, culture, and other identity-based factors. They also reinforce the notion that how one becomes a leader and how one accomplishes objectives on behalf of an organization relies on relationship-building, or, as previously discussed, what Komives, Lucas and McMahon (year) term relational leadership. Cultural leadership, in particular, is dependent on relationship-building that considers and benefits from gender, cultural, and racial/ethnic identities, among other factors. The researcher's challenge when looking at relationships is to view these as complex in order to "generate the insights and evidence that inform practice" (Kellerman and Rhode (Eds.), 2007, p. 447).

From multicultural feminist studies we know it is never one but multiple stories that need to be told and understood, and differences, according to Mohanty, are never just differences (2003). In other words, being able to identify and understand the differences between, for example, first and second generation "others," racial issues, and gendered, cultural, and religious identities helps create a more meaningful dialogue in which to further our understanding of what one's multicultural-ness truly means. Consider an international student who leaves home where she/he is part of the majority population and comes to study at a university in the U.S. as a minority. What aspects of a student's home carries over into the adopted home (even temporarily), and how does she/he interpret this as part of identity, and express it to others?

For Mohanty (2006), the challenge is to see how differences allow us to explain the connections and border crossings better and more accurately, how specifying difference allows us to theorize universal concerns more fully. Student leaders' concern for those of different cultural communities and identities is expressed in how they created and expanded Cultural Fusion. I link their desire to create space for awareness and understanding to, in Mohanty's words, "...build(ing) coalitions and solidarities across borders" (p. 226). At Mason, students experience cultural borders daily—in and out of classrooms, student centers, dining areas, labs, libraries, recreational spaces, etc. These spaces may not purposely set out to cultivate cultural awareness or even welcome it; whereas the space created by Cultural Fusion purposely means to collaborate, share, and celebrate cultural diversity. Cultural Fusion allows and encourages students to go beyond what is, to what can be.

According to Gardiner and Enomoto (2004), multicultural leadership is "leadership that is focused on affecting change in schools and society to affirm pluralism (and is) concerned with redefining who we are as Americans to be more inclusive" (p. 27). Addressing multiculturalism is also complicated in that it encompasses more than the broad categories of class, race, and gender, and extends to one's "national origin, native language, sexual orientation, physical and mental ability as well as other differences" (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2004, p. 27). In looking at developing student multicultural leadership with curriculum that deals with diversity issues, Gardiner and Enomoto found existing programs to be lacking given inadequate attention to diversity in the leadership programs that they studied. They concluded that university programs and school systems

would benefit from incorporating multicultural leadership into their practices. As discussed later in my findings, I believe Cultural Fusion's student leaders would agree with Gardiner's and Enomoto's assessment that "Multicultural leadership gets to the heart of an ethic of care in schooling by recognizing and valuing the important contributions of all who create the school and community" (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2004, p. 40).

Reflecting on Bordas' (2007) work, I consider what Cultural Fusion's student leadership shares with being colonized, a common denominator among African Americans, Latinas/os, and American Indians whose leadership forms she describes as people-oriented, community-focused, and advocacy-oriented. Bordas' studies on communities of color and what these can contribute to leadership studies is based on understandings of culture that define members of a community and reflects the multicultural population of the U.S. But whereas "recognizing common abilities and celebrating differences are two of the touchstones of diversity" (Bordas, 2007, p. x), Bordas also acknowledges that although these groups' traditions and patterns have long been part of the U.S. cultural landscape, these have not always been recognized or appreciated by the dominant population. Bordas describes this as "the harsh reality that people of color have been identified as 'minorities,' which means they are marginalized, especially in terms of power and the decision-making structures of society" (Bordas, 2007, p. 106). Such distancing plays into our social hierarchies and white privilege, which positions white society over those who are marginalized, oppressed, colonized. This distancing is also impetus for the liberatory educational experience that Freire promotes: teachers and

students alike teach and learn from each other in a reciprocal process. By extension, different individuals and groups can also teach and learn from one another. As discussed in Chapter 4, student leaders sought to do just that with Cultural Fusion: bringing diverse individuals and groups—minority and dominant—together to acknowledge and understand similarities among differences.

Despite roadblocks, the need for multicultural leadership remains because “to be relevant and effective, leaders must be in sync with the pulse of their times. Therefore, it follows that, given the powerful influence diversity will have in defining the twenty-first century, those who step up to leadership today must also answer the call to multicultural leadership” (Bordas, 2007, p. 185). Bordas defines multicultural leadership as an inclusive form of leadership “that incorporates the influences, practices, and values of diverse cultures...and encourages diverse people to actively engage, contribute, and tap their potential” (Bordas, 2007, p. 8). Specifically, she describes eight principles of multicultural leadership that I found useful for analyzing self-portraits submitted by Cultural Fusion’s student leadership. These principles are: learning from the past, or “Sankofa;” moving from an “I” perspective to a “we” perspective; “my home is your home” or “mi casa es su casa;” being a leader among equals, as a guardian of public values (activist traditions), as a community steward (working for the common good); recognition and incorporation of family; and gratitude. Bordas identifies these principles to illustrate the cultural diversity among Latino, African American, and American Indian community leaders, and the effectiveness of these groups’ various leadership practices and traditions. Through their stories we learn how cultural communities and their

leadership can make an impact by embracing their roots and recognizing the unique contributions cultural diversity can offer. Within native Indian communities, this occurs through cultural leadership that learns from its past and acknowledges *the spirit* of leadership lived. In the African American community, this equates to the concept of *ubuntu*, or “recognizing the inner connection among people and acknowledging that their spirit and that of humanity are one (Bordas, 2007, p. 149). “The important thing to realize is that people can develop affinities and sensitivities for a number of different cultures. Leaders can acquire multicultural competencies and work effectively with many different populations” (Bordas, 2007, p. 151). As a result, leadership practices can be strengthened by incorporating cultural and multicultural approaches into the mainstream where they can also inspire an increasingly ethnically and culturally rich workforce.

Similarly, Heifetz (as cited in Kellerman and Rhode (Eds.), 2007) states, “A successful adaptation (of thriving) enables a living system to take the best from its history into the future” (p. 317). When asking Cultural Fusion’s student leadership to reflect on their past experiences and backgrounds in self-reflections (see Chapter 4), I hoped to understand what might have influenced their specific involvement in and commitment to Cultural Fusion so as to provide a more intimate look at individual student leadership development. In this way I would better understand their comments on the present and the importance of effecting change for the future.

In balancing individualism with the collective both Kellerman and Rhode (Eds.), (2007) and Bordas (2007) discuss the value of inclusion, which is also a goal of feminism. This in turn can lead to social networks as building blocks for leadership in

general, but also, if we follow Bordas, multicultural leadership. Recognizing a benefit for the whole community over that for an individual is one of the characteristics of the “we” perspective, as well as emphasizing the group’s opinions and actions. It is where “individual goals are integrated with those of the collective” (Bordas, 2007, p. 48) and collective programming can occur. This kind of cultural leadership, where the well-being of the community comes first, results in groups who define their reality by working together as a “we” and employ inclusive and collaborative decision-making structures. Collective “we” processes are also linked to social change because their purpose is to enhance “the well-being of human existence” (Bordas, 2007, p.70). In contrast, according to Bordas, “The White culture does not have that kind of centralized identity with people of their race or color” (Bordas, 2007, p. 54). Moreover: For example, while Mason’s student enrollment statistics equate ethnicity to race, and list White American among them, this does not always result in a clear understanding of white culture since it is a subset of and linked to white hegemony.

Because historically many Whites have not identified as a culture or group, it is logical, therefore, that they are unconscious of their advantages or privileges.... Furthermore, this advantage is embedded in institutions, creating a society of unearned entitlement in which Whites have a favored status.... The lack of awareness of White privilege perpetuates the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all... Dismantling these myths is fundamental to supporting authentic democracy and to creating a multicultural society in which the assets of all people can be realized. (Bordas, 2007, pp. 111-112)

In this case study, I use the terms ethnicity and culture interchangeably and accept Bordas' definition that these terms can be used to represent groups who "share a common ancestry, language, customs, religion, and historical experience" (Bordas, 2007, p. 104). Yet while the white American race has roots in many nations given its immigrant history, the larger knowledge that whites are the dominant everything (race, culture, society, *the way things are*) also acts to privilege, distinguish, and separate them from those lesser positioned—in this case, those who identify as culturally-diverse students.

I wish to point out that none of Cultural Fusion's core student leadership described themselves as white, although white students did participate as volunteers. However, as discussed in Chapter 4, my survey of Cultural Fusion's student volunteers found that more students of color were involved and were more likely to provide feedback than white students who volunteered.

Being a leader among peers is an apt description, in my opinion, of what happens on college campuses. In this case study, students are both the leaders and the participants or recipients of leadership. College student development studies also recognize the importance of student communities to look to and value student leadership, as a contributor to meaningful college experiences. With their history of protests, college campuses fit well within Bordas' description that leadership comes from recognizing a cause in the community (2007, p. 105). Similar to her description of Latina/o culture, where leadership reflects "accomplishing extraordinary things while remaining ordinary people" (Bordas, 2007, p. 87), so too can this describe a potential outcome of student leadership within the student community. I found other similarities between Kellerman



and Rhode (Eds.), and Bordas in terms of the contributions of culture and gender influences to leadership. “Many women leaders add value to organizations by strategically applying the strengths they have cultivated through their professional, gendered, and cultural experiences” (Kellerman & Rhode (Eds.), 2007, p. 333). One of the goals for Cultural Fusion, as stated by its student leaders, was also to allow other students to lead from the benefit of their experiences, in order to put on an event that could better serve all who participate. The description of authentic leaders—those who embrace their heritage and use their backgrounds, and who are “not threatened by people with other origins” (Kellerman & Rhode (Eds.), 2007, p. 349) also resonates with Bordas (2007)—authentic leaders welcome working with those of other backgrounds.

Understanding multiculturalism is difficult in today’s world. In an extreme example, I recall how a negative comment about multiculturalism reportedly led to a mass shooting of youth in Norway in the summer of 2011. Such actions point to the existence of those who think that something is wrong with multiculturalism. To me, they also point to the need for diverse leadership across political, economic, social, and educational spectrums to help all of us better understand each other. I apply this to Cultural Fusion’s student leaders, who in terms of their willingness to come forward to take on key roles on behalf of students in a major university, a microcosm of society, set examples for other students who may not have thought of themselves capable of such leadership. Student experience here has implications for the future as well, in that it may also help them deal with the gender and cultural differences in leadership they are likely to encounter beyond their college careers. Increasing diversity in leadership, then, can

change attitudes towards participation and representation, and support gender balance. Again, going back to Kellerman and Rhode (Eds.), valuing inclusion leads to building bridges, and brings important “relational skills in multicultural competence” (2007, p. 344) useful for conflict management, interpersonal communication, feedback, and commitment to diversity and inclusion.

### **Reflections on Critical Race Theory**

It is implicit in this case study to understand how students, and especially culturally diverse students, experience their college environment. College student development studies have included assessments of campus climates with diverse student make-up and some have specifically looked at the way students of color and white students perceive this climate (Rankin & Reason, 2005). As the ethnic diversity of college student populations increases, it seems imperative to not only educate students about issues related to race and privilege, but to understand how they experience difference in light of their interactions with other students and overall campus environment. Given this increasing student diversity, also of concern—particularly among the student leaders in this case study—is how ethnic-based student communities maintain their identities in the midst of such diversity. The phenomenon known as balkanization, whereby racial, ethnic and cultural groups remain distinct, separate entities, has been the subject of many studies critiquing the concept of the American melting pot. For example, Charlton and Kritsonis note that “Diversity is one aspect of student socialization that continues to increase the divide between the success rates of

various student demographic groups” (2008, p.5). Diversity, as it plays out socially, can also divide ethnic groups. This phenomenon is in my findings in Chapter 4.

To researchers Delgado and Stefancic (2001), critical race studies seek to transform “the relationship among race, racism, and power” (p. 2). Critical race theory questions contemporary legal theory and its tenets, such as equality, and how this plays out in society. Critical race theory acknowledges and leadership studies show that most leadership positions, such as CEOs and political representatives, are not held by women or people of color. I considered this framework for this case study because Cultural Fusion is situated in the field of education where critical race theory is a tool for ethnic, women, and global studies curricula, among others, as well as by educators (and administrators) to better understand and learn from diverse student environments, practices, and outcomes. I also align critical race theory’s activism component with my understanding of feminism—that is, giving voice to women and recognizing their contributions to society and working to make a more just world for women and all people—while recognizing how “...society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies...” (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001, p. 3). This is also a goal of Cultural Fusion’s student leaders.

Cultural Fusion’s relevance to critical race theory is that this event represents the work and participation of students from various national, cultural, racial, and social backgrounds within the context of a white-dominated and patriarchal society. Their identities stand in contrast to white students who are not marginalized on the basis of race or color and for whom solidarity is not an issue. As culturally-diverse students they are

minorities in the U.S. educational system. It is they who have to adapt to this environment, not the other way around.

Minority perspectives make explicit the need for fundamental change in the ways we think and construct knowledge. Exposing how minority cultural viewpoints differ from white cultural viewpoints requires a delineation of the complex set of social interactions through which minority consciousness has developed.

Distinguishing the consciousness of racial minorities requires acknowledgement of the feelings and intangible modes of perception unique to those who have historically been socially, structurally, and intellectually marginalized in the United States (Barnes, 1990, p. 1864).

Feminist principles that “attempt to raise awareness of and questions about basic assumptions and beliefs...that some people/ideas/ways of knowing have been privileged and other made invisible” (J. E. Lambert, 1997, p. 11), also help expose the dichotomy between Americanism (white, patriarchal, standard) and other (ethnic, racial, non-standard, different).

At best, there seems to be blurry line separating race or ethnicity, culture, and multiculturalism. Studies on critical race theory contend that race is socially-constructed. But there may now be certain blindness to culture because our thoughts about race and culture are embedded and intertwined historically. This is where sharing and writing about ourselves (such as in the portraiture method discussed in the next chapter), recording others’ stories, and interviewing from a feminist methodological approach can

help us deconstruct ideas about race and culture. Stories give voice to the invisible, the unknown, and all too often, the marginalized.

### **Reflections on Whiteness and White Privilege**

In this case study I consider whiteness as both a race and a culture. Lott (as cited in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, 1999) defines white studies as “the study of whiteness as a historically constructed ethnic or cultural identity” (p. 241). Andersen and Collins (2004) define culture as “the “total way of life” of a group of people” and white privilege as including “knowledge (that) has been constructed largely from the experiences of the most powerful groups—because they have had the most access to systems of education and communication.” (Andersen & Collins, 2004, p. 15). One needs only to look at history to see how racial, cultural, and nationality expressions blend into one another and are often used interchangeably “in political discourses about race, nation, identity, ownership, and belonging” (Frankenberg, 1999, p. 9). In other words, they have become “naming systems for differences read hierarchically” (Frankenberg, 1999, p. 10). When advised to consider studies regarding whiteness and white privilege for this thesis, I admit these were areas I had not given much serious thought to. I learned that this in itself is symptomatic of being white. Although I do identify with my Polish and Puerto Rican heritage, I acknowledge that throughout my life I have in fact been advantaged because of my whiteness. Recalling a course in the historiographies of women who immigrated to the U.S. made me revisit what whiteness meant to those who wanted to become part of this country. Early immigrant women and men were subject to substantial racial posturing by white and often male immigration officials, politicians, relief and social

assistance personnel, and religious figures, for example. Their acceptance to the U.S., whether immediate or earned, or their denigration was directly determined by systems established by and for American whites. The course was both a study of whiteness in relation to other-ness as well as a study of the gendering of U.S. immigration.

Like critical race theory, whiteness also helps to understand the context of diverse student populations within U.S. colleges and universities. According to Frankenberg (1999), “everyone-but-white-people are subjected to every more meticulous scrutiny [and that] critical attention to whiteness offers a ground not only for the examination of white selves but also for the excavation of the foundations of *all* racial and cultural positionings” (pp. 1-2). First, it is crucial to take into account the position of the racial order of the person viewing whiteness... the variability in how whiteness is seen is anything but random; rather it can be accounted for, analyzed, and challenged” (Frankenberg, 1999, p. 6). Cultural Fusion, in a way, can be thought of as a response to an environment that consists mostly of whiteness. Speaking only from the perspective of one case study, I believe that those students who organize and implement events such as Cultural Fusion realize the importance of others’ needs to be recognized and whites’ needs to see others as they see themselves, not as whites may view them. In this way, Cultural Fusion student leaders help to “unmark” the whiteness of the university environment.

If, as Frankenberg and others note, whiteness is constructed, so too is white privilege. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) describe white privilege as “reserving favors, smiles, kindness, the best stories, one’s most charming side, and invitations to real

intimacy for one's own kind or class" (p. 25). White privilege also "refers to the myriad of social advantages, benefits, and courtesies that come with being a member of the dominant race" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 78). What whiteness represents to international and ethnic-identified students is important to consider in discussing how college student leadership development occurs, recognizing that while U.S. universities strive to increase their diverse student representation, international students and U.S. ethnic-identified students are usually in the minority on U.S. campuses. As Delgado and Stefancic point out, minorities in the U.S. have historically been pitted against each other as whites sort out which group gets to advance. It seems then that we should not dismiss considering the extent to which such binary thinking might be extended to student interactions on U.S. campuses.

Berger (2000) states, "...the myth of racism's impending end is that it fosters a false sense of complacency and assurance" (p. 35). One cannot assume that the more minorities approach majority status, mere numbers will erase insensitivities, injustices, and the lack of education and understanding that characterized white majority environments. So too, just because there are increasing numbers of international and minority students in the U.S. colleges and universities, one cannot assume that the challenges they face are no less real. Because this diversity clearly is not limited to a discussion of blacks and whites, I would extend Berger's observation to include persons of color: "Mainstream America culture's avoidance of black talent and excellence suggests one of the greatest deficiencies of whiteness: its inability to celebrate and learn from the strengths and accomplishments of black people" (Berger, 2000, p. 138).

hooks (1999b) also brings to light how one group, such as blacks, looks upon and studies another, such as whites and what happens when this gazing becomes known. Such cross-gazing naturally occurs on the university campus given growing diverse student populations. This curiosity, or need to know something about the other, is often already grounded in pre-conditioning and learned notions, not necessarily reality. Perhaps events like Cultural Fusion and other ideas explored by students themselves help address and overcome the wearing of the mask, as hooks puts it, that allows “many of us (to) pretend to be comfortable in the face of whiteness only to turn our backs and give expression to intense levels of discomfort” (as cited in *Displacing Whiteness*, p. 169).

### **Summary**

This chapter presented a discussion of the theoretical frameworks useful for understanding culture and gender influences on college student leadership development. Specifically, research on student leadership development in higher education crosscuts feminist theory/methodology, critical race theory, whiteness studies and white privilege, providing a rich basis with which to analyze the findings in this case study. Freire’s and hooks’ commitment to transformative educational practice is relevant when considering students of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds within an educational community whose leadership and student membership is white majority. Regarding women and leadership, I draw on feminist theory that discusses the relationships between gender and culture and studies on women and leadership. I also discuss feminist methodology’s usefulness to this case study in terms of its goals for creating new and ethically grounded knowledge. In the next chapter I present my methodology.



## CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

Feminist research has contributed much to our understanding of the complex nature of knowledge. Feminists have defined knowledge more broadly and inclusively, and in a multidimensional and multiperspectival way in the belief that the traditional view of knowledge has privileged objective knowledge that distances the knower from the known, objectifies the subject of study, and constructs knowledge using an experimental model (J. E. Lambert, 1997, p. 12).

### **Research Design**

This case study supports feminist work that seeks to be inclusive and transformative and challenges traditional knowledge and knowledge production. Feminist methodology is characterized by research that is conducted from the perspective of women, contains self-disclosure, gives voice to those who participate, seeks to create new knowledge, and is committed to social change. According to Reinharz, feminist case studies serve three major purposes: “to analyze the change in a phenomenon over time, to analyze the significance of a phenomenon for future events, and to analyze the relation among parts of a phenomenon” (1992, p. 164). In this case study, I focus attention on students’ voices and the language they use to describe their experiences with Cultural Fusion and what they hoped to accomplish through this event.

I used a multi-method feminist approach to document and analyze the importance and meaning of Cultural Fusion to Mason students. Much of this approach focused on interviewing, which is described as the most widely used technique for conducting systematic social inquiry and a way of acquiring knowledge by asking people to talk about their lives (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003). In dissecting the interviewing method as it is traditionally constructed in social science research, Oakley (1981) asserts that traditional interviewing is problematic for feminist interviewing for a number of reasons. She argues that traditional interviewing practice is grounded in a mostly masculine model of sociology and society that has resulted in both the undervaluation of not only women's models but of the study of women as well. Oakley uses Goode's and Hatt's description of traditional, *legitimate* interviewing, which can be viewed as "all the warmth and personality exchange of a conversation with the clarity and guidelines of scientific searching" (as cited in Oakley, 1981, p. 33). She further characterizes traditional interviewing as "friendly but not too friendly" and the interviewer and interviewee as "depersonalised participants in the research process" (Oakley, 1981, pp. 33, 37). In other words, the interviewer maintains an objective, detached, proper, scientific stance when interviewing the Other. In contrast, Oakley portrays *illegitimate* interviewing that incorporates feelings, the possibility for friendship, empathy, answering interviewees' questions in an honest manner—what traditional interviewing would consider improper. It is this personal involvement that I strived to bring to the interview process and in doing so open the door to an honest and more meaningful learning experience for the students and me. This approach is consistent with ethnological feminist methodology that

considers the process of obtaining knowledge to be as important as the knowledge that is produced. In addition, feminist methodology values ethical considerations of research participants and self-disclosure on the part of the researcher. As a result, the student participants in this case study were actively engaged in the research process, and I continually shared my analysis and outcomes with them, always leaving the door open for their feedback. I also disclosed information about myself as a non-traditional student, my ethnic and cultural background, and my personal experiences as these related to our discussions.

Telling the story of Cultural Fusion's student leadership through a case study approach is also important given that case studies of women in sociology are historically minimal because of the male-dominated nature of the discipline. According to Reinharz (1992), this has resulted in women's invisibility in sociology, the distortion or omission of women's accomplishments, and sociological literature generalized from the male perspective. Reinharz (1992) argues that feminist case studies can and do serve to correct the record so that we have a truer sociological understanding of women. Feminist case studies illustrate ideas, explore and map issues, ask provocative questions, and have also proved generalizations invalid and suggested new avenues for research. Importantly, case studies allow for "cross-cultural or comparative analyses of women's lives and organizations" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 166).

### **Purpose of Study and Research Questions**

Given the increasing numbers of both international students and other culturally diverse students on U.S. campuses, the purpose of my study is to understand student

leadership development through gender and cultural influences. Specifically, I wanted to learn more about what constitutes student leadership as envisioned and implemented by students, to explore the intersections of gender and culture as these relate and contribute to student leadership development, and to identify some conditions and practices that enable such leadership to effect change. My research questions were to determine: (1) whether and how culture and gender factors influenced this group of culturally diverse students' participation in Cultural Fusion—as an example of a major university extra-curricular/non-academic event; (2) how culturally diverse student leadership can effect change; and (3) what a qualitative-based study to learn how students' personal experiences and backgrounds influence their college experiences can add to overall college student development research.

### **Researcher's Role and Considerations**

As the researcher I wanted to recognize and uphold the importance of ethical considerations in using a feminist approach. One of my main goals of using feminist methodology is to draw on women's experiences to better know and understand the perspectives of women. My overall goal as a feminist researcher was to ensure that the findings and knowledge produced in this case study were direct reflections of students' feedback. In particular, I attempted to:

- pay close attention to and communicate both the verbal and nonverbal language case study participants expressed in our meetings and interviews;
- provide self-disclosure about my personal background and experience;

- ensure that students who participated understood their importance to this study, with the hope that they would gain something from it, such as exposure at related subject matter conferences, in keeping with my desire to communicate and assist with students' future goals for Cultural Fusion as these were developed; and
- participate in event planning meetings, attend events, and access student participant feedback.

I am also mindful of my subject position as a white woman and in particular recall hooks (1994) when she critiques the condition of white women working on feminist theory that involves diversity and difference that does so from the standpoint of those women (or persons) of color, rather than one of acknowledging their position as a result of their whiteness. Thus, I ask the reader to be aware that my findings related to difference and diversity were obtained in an environment where whiteness is still hegemony.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Data collection for this study took place from the fall 2010 through the spring 2011 semesters on Mason's Fairfax campus. Conducting this study on the campus itself was important for the convenience of the participants but also because it is where students involved with Cultural Fusion attend classes, conduct planning meetings, interact with University Life staff, and are most engaged in their academic and extracurricular pursuits

All research was conducted and data collected in accordance with Mason's Human Subjects Research Protections (HSRB). My earlier HSRB protocol (approved for the class project phase of this case study) was modified to accommodate the specific goals of continuing this ethnographic case study, as discussed in the introduction. My specific data collection methods are presented below. Because it is also relevant, I have included information on methods I used in course-related research in fall 2010 and spring 2011.

Research I conducted in the fall 2010 and spring 2011 included my participant observations of student planning meetings, individual and focus group interviews with four of Cultural Fusion's core student planners (each of about one hour in duration), attendance and observations at two of Cultural Fusion's activities, and follow-up correspondence with the core student leadership group. Collectively, such efforts provided coverage of the pre-, during, and post phases of the overall event. The planning meetings were helpful sites for gaining information on how specific activities and the event as a whole were planned, marketed, and implemented, and to learn more specifically about the types of students who were involved in running such an event. Individual interviews provided more about the student planners' roles in this event and its history. Attendance and observation at two of the actual events provided information on audiences and participants and an understanding of how such events were received (e.g., good attendance, applause, other indicators). In this earlier work I conducted content analyses of student feedback evaluations and student volunteer lists. These analyses confirmed my earlier findings, provided new insights, and raised additional areas for

future work. I found that using diverse of data collection techniques (see Figure 4) resulted in these techniques not only complementing each other but also providing further insight about what influenced students to commit to Cultural Fusion and about how others responded to their efforts. I will discuss this further in my findings in Chapter 4.

The following table summarizes my data collection methods, participation rates, and time periods associated with each.

<b>Data Collection Method</b>	<b>Participation/Response</b>	<b>Time Period</b>
Interviews with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student A</li> <li>• Student B</li> <li>• Student C</li> <li>• Student D</li> </ul> <p>Focus group interview with above</p>	100 percent	September to December 2010
Attendance, observation, and participation at Cultural Fusion 2010 planning meetings and events		September through October 2010
Student feedback material collected from Cultural Fusion 2010		I received this in spring 2011.
List of Cultural Fusion 2010 volunteers that was composed of names of students, faculty, staff, administration, and organizations in random order		I received this in spring 2011 and used it to develop and generate emails for the list of student volunteers who then received the survey in August 2011.
Cultural Fusion student volunteer survey	20 percent (22 out of 109)	I received survey responses from August to October 2011.
Portraits (personal reflections) for students A, B, C, D	100 percent	I requested these in July 2011 and received them from October to December 2011.
Follow-up interviews with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• one student co-founder and the student coordinator of Cultural Fusion 2011</li> <li>• a University Life staff person</li> <li>• acting director of Mason's Global Crossings Living Learning Community</li> </ul>	100 percent	October to December 2011

Table 1. Data collection methods, participation, and time periods.

**Interviews.** I used a feminist and participatory interviewing technique that allows for greater interaction between interviewer and respondent and opens possibilities for shared learning. I followed a non-structured interview format with open-ended questions and ensured that the respondents understood their importance to the study. Reinharz refers to this as phenomenological interviewing—giving much of the control over to the interviewee/respondent who guides the process by leading the conversation about a lived experience rather than by the researcher’s prepared questions. The validity of a feminist approach is reinforced because Cultural Fusion’s key student leaders live this experience in an intense manner, committing themselves to a near semester-long project alongside their academic obligations. In these interviews the students and I explored a number of themes, which included: the needs that Cultural Fusion meets; who participates in Cultural Fusion; and the history of Cultural Fusion and how it changed over time. Throughout our discussions I got a sense of what student leadership means to the students and in general. Using a semi-structured interview format, I also followed up on student leaders’ reflections about Cultural Fusion’s future, both with the student leaders and several University staff. As a result, this case study includes an action-oriented research component, which is a characteristic and goal of feminist research.

During the interviews, the students were more focused on the event itself and what they hoped to accomplish, and we did not have the opportunity to explore in depth their backgrounds and experiences. However, it was evident to me that these student leaders were very passionate about their work on Cultural Fusion and I believed it important to learn about the reasons for this and more about the students as individuals.



To facilitate this, and to discover what I suspected were gender and/or cultural influences, I asked the core group of Cultural Fusion's student leaders to compose self-reflections, or portraits about themselves, as discussed below. My interviews with the students also solicited their reflections about Cultural Fusion's future.

**Student portraits or personal statements.** Portraiture, a method developed by sociologist Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, seeks to record and interpret the perspectives and experience of the people being studied, documenting their voices and their visions—their authority, knowledge and wisdom. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997),

Through the science of portraiture, the researcher crosses personal boundaries to gain a more intimate understanding of participants. And through the art of portraiture, the researcher crosses creative boundaries to blend art and science through narrative portraits that share stories and convey meaning in ways that other traditional methods may not allow (as cited in Jenkins, 2009, p. 143).

Portraiture lends itself well to feminist research because feminist research is subject-driven, so the more opportunities and methods used to gain information from the subject(s), the truer and richer the material becomes. "Portraiture calls for the researcher to directly acknowledge that she is observing, analyzing, and telling the research story" (Jenkins, 2009, p. 143). Portraiture also focuses on the relationship between the researcher and the people she wants to understand in order to better communicate her findings through their voices and expressions. According to Reinharz (1992), using more than one method opens more avenues for answering the "why" and is geared toward the subject, rather than fitting the subject into one method. Jenkins (2011), in her work in

college student leadership development has found that the portraiture method's creative aspect helps the researcher gain additional insight into students' identities by way of their backgrounds and experiences. My asking Cultural Fusion's student leaders to construct portraits, or self-reflections, had two goals. The first, as Jenkins describes it, is "to look for knowledge production on leadership outside of traditional academic venues" (2011, p. 3). The second goal was to reaffirm one of the tenets of feminist methodology, which is to give voice to those who are underrepresented and whose voices might not otherwise be heard. Jenkins (2011) considers the work, philosophies, and scholarship of every day individuals (including her parents) in discovering what leadership is and how it can affect others and bring social change. This is especially relevant for cultural and multicultural leadership that depends on and is often driven by the soul and spirit that comes from one's cultural grounding. Such stories of leadership can enrich scholarship on cultural leadership beyond the traditional canon.

I solicited portraits, or self-reflection statements from the four key student leaders of Cultural Fusion 2010. Specifically, in July 2011 I contacted these students by email and explained that I sought to obtain a fuller understanding of them and the reasons for their involvement with Cultural Fusion through *portraiture*, which I described as a personally-narrated reflection about their backgrounds and experiences (e.g., ideas about culture and gender, opinions of culture in college, thoughts on the importance of culture and gender in your lives) and how this influenced their involvement with Cultural Fusion. My email correspondence to them further reads: "You have freedom of choice and creativity regarding what to include, how to structure your "portrait," and how long you

want it to be. My goal for these portraits was that they will provide insight to me and to you, and that I as the researcher will gain a more intimate understanding of you and the roles you played in Cultural Fusion's leadership.” As a result, I hoped that these student portraits would provide a reflection of each student’s commitment to Cultural Fusion and sense of leadership as connected to or influenced by her/his cultural background and experience, as well as any gendered influences.

I initially received individual reflections from three of the four student leaders. After several additional gentle reminders (I persisted because this student was one of Cultural Fusion’s co-founders and instrumental in securing its future), I received the final reflection. The reason I did not receive it sooner, according to the student, was due her graduate school workload and grant-related research activity that left little time for much else. However, in her responses to my several reminders, she remained committed to providing her reflections and assisting in my follow-up data collection efforts. Overall, the reflections were truly unique to each student and provided varying degrees of insight into their backgrounds and what motivated them to work on Cultural Fusion. One was very artistic in nature, filled with descriptive words and phrases and an actual self-portrait. Two others spoke very highly of one of the co-founders, as a friend and as a leader, and how naturally influential she was to gaining their commitment to Cultural Fusion. These student reflections helped me to connect information about each of the students to some of the themes discussed in my interviews with them, as presented in my findings in Chapter 4.

**Student volunteer survey.** In the late summer and fall of 2011 I also conducted a survey of the larger group of students who volunteered with Cultural Fusion. I conducted this survey using Survey Monkey, a popular, free online survey software and questionnaire program. I prepared a short, nine question survey that asked Cultural Fusion 2010 student volunteers for limited demographic data (e.g., ethnicity, international student status or not, gender) and to briefly explain what motivated them to participate in this event (the survey questions and email solicitation are included as Appendix I). I then prepared the email distribution list, using the list of people involved in Cultural Fusion Fairfax 2010 that I received from one of the event co-founders. Since this list contained not only students, but names of student organizations, faculty, staff, and administrators, I created a new list of only individual students and researched their email addresses using People Finder, Mason's web-based Faculty, Staff, and Student Directory. For those names I could not readily conclude to be students, or could not locate in the directory, I forwarded the list to two core student leaders and asked if they could provide further information. One student leader responded and indicated that of the list of 29 names I sent, one was an on-campus vendor (not a student) and that she did not have any further information on the other names. Thus, I determined that the remaining 109 student names and emails to be the universe for survey respondents. Prior to sending the survey itself, I contacted all 109 students by email to introduce myself and my study, included information on the required informed consent form, and alerted these students that they would soon be receiving a link to the survey. I sent the first survey on August 16, 2011 to all 109 student volunteers. I sent a follow-up email on August 30, 2011 to 95 student

volunteers who had not yet responded, and sent a final reminder email on September 16, 2011 to the 90 remaining non-responding students in the hope that I might reach a solid 20 percent response rate. Of the 109, one email bounced, one female respondent replied that she was not a student but staff, and two female students responded that they had been sent the survey in error since they did not recall volunteering for Cultural Fusion. In total, 22 students responded to the survey, representing a 20 percent response rate.

**Follow-up interviews related to Cultural Fusion's future.** In September 2011, several weeks before Cultural Fusion 2011 events were to occur, I conducted a follow-up interview with one of the original event co-founders, who introduced me to the graduate student hired to run Cultural Fusion 2011. In this interview, I focused on questions related to changes in Cultural Fusion's organization for the 2011 event and its new relationship with University Life. The graduate student also shared information on his background and experiences that he believed were relevant to his involvement in Cultural Fusion. To follow through, in December 2011 I conducted an interview with a University Life staff person knowledgeable about the effort to provide a more permanent structure within University Life for Cultural Fusion's continuance. Specifically, I asked about this staff person's role and involvement with student planning and student leadership efforts related to Cultural Fusion. I solicited opinions about whether there should be a certain level of student involvement and leadership for an event such as Cultural Fusion, and if so, what would be the optimum amount of student input? I inquired about how such a level could be maintained given varying student commitment levels and other factors that

can affect continuity of commitment. I further asked about how Cultural Fusion might change as a result of a more formal University organization structure.

In several of my interviews with Cultural Fusion's student leaders, I learned that the two co-founders had had discussions between themselves about the need for a multicultural living learning community for Mason students that would encourage student leadership development and provide a possible training ground for future Cultural Fusion events. Their hope was that such a community, open to all Mason students, would provide students with the ins and outs of how to plan such events within student programming, including training in events management, grant proposals, community outreach, etc. In the fall of 2011, Mason added and enrolled students in an on-campus multicultural living learning community, called Global Crossings. In an effort to discern whether Cultural Fusion's co-founders contributed to this effort, in November 2011, I interviewed the University staff person who conducts the Global Leadership course, a requirement for the 30 student participants in Mason's pilot Global Crossings living learning community. I had originally planned to interview the director of Mason's living learning community program; however, she retired before I was able to schedule a meeting with her. Since that retirement, the staff person I met with, who is also a graduate student, has taken over as faculty instructor and acting or interim director of this new living learning community. The interview focused on her role and involvement with Global Crossings and gaining an understanding of its student participants. Questions included: How is this community different from others that Mason offers? What, if any role did student leaders of Cultural Fusion play in the creation and development of Global

Crossings? How was this effort conceived and planned? What has been the student reaction to Global Crossings, both from the standpoint of those who participate in it and others who are not members?

### **Data Management**

To protect the identity of the individuals who participated in this research, I assigned a single letter to each individual interviewed. To ensure accuracy and protect confidentiality, I transcribed interviews as soon as possible afterward and saved these as electronic files identified by interviewee-assigned letter and date. All records of email correspondence, student leaders' personal reflections, student volunteer lists, student volunteer survey results, and interview transcriptions were saved as electronic files on my personal computer in a password-protected folder, and accessible only to me. I maintained hard copies of my notes from observations made at Cultural Fusion planning meetings, event promotional materials, and coded analytical memoranda (based on transcribed interviews) in a locked cabinet in my home, again accessible only to me.

### **Data Analysis**

All interviews were digitally recorded as audiotape files using a Sony digital audio-recorder. The transcription of the interviews was played back multiple times and transcribed verbatim, with particular attention to pauses, tone, and other means of expression of the interviewee. All transcriptions were read through and analyzed thoroughly using the feminist methodological approach to determine themes that emerged. Themes that were identified were analytically coded manually. By this I mean that I conducted a line-by-line analysis of the interview transcripts, summarizing the

responses to questions and identifying key words and thoughts so as to organize this text and discover patterns across the various interviews that might otherwise be difficult to detect by reading each alone. Coding allowed me to focus on “What do I see going on here?” and “How can I categorize this information?” By coding I was able distinguish patterns and emerging themes, and better interpret the responses being provided. A benefit of line-by-line coding, at least for me, was another chance to really *listen* to what the interviewees were saying because sometimes what we think we hear is not what is truly being said or meant. According to Emerson (1995), analytic coding, the line-by-line categorization of notes can be viewed as a two-phase process: (1) the open coding, or the line-by-line identification of ideas/themes/issues, followed by (2) focused coding, or the detailed analysis of particular interest areas. This coding then results in theoretical memos that provide additional details and context for individual coded elements, and also link some of the themes/categories identified in initial memos. The researcher’s analysis occurs throughout this process, and can be directed and re-directed as issues and ideas are developed and re-developed. I also used analytical coding for students’ self-reflection narratives.

### **Limitation of the Study**

This study is limited in that it is a case study that involved a small number of participants and a single event at one location. However, my methodology brings attention to the subjects and the authenticity of their relationship with Cultural Fusion and the factors that contributed to the student leadership that evolved, as well as the relationship between the researcher and the subjects. Portraiture allowed me to be



concerned with the authentic experience of this particular case, rather than generalizing findings or obtaining similar results. Did I tell the true and honest story? Did I capture the essence of what the students were saying? If the students read it, would they agree?

In summary, in Chapter 3 I presented the design for this case study and established the context and purpose for the ethnographic study. I presented a discussion of my role as a researcher and presented details on data collection methods, data management, and the data analysis process. In Chapter 4 I will present my findings and analysis.

## CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In this chapter I discuss the findings that emerged from the analysis of data collected in this ethnographic case study of Cultural Fusion. Most of the findings came from the group's core student leadership—its two female co-founders, one Asian, the other Turkish-American; a female international student of Asian heritage; and a male Hispanic-American student. These were the students who responded to my email to Cultural Fusion's student co-founders requesting the opportunity to interview students involved in running this event, and these were the same students whom I observed as primary contributors at Cultural Fusion planning meetings. Specifically, I observed that one of the co-founders consistently directed these meetings and the other three students consistently provided input based upon their work areas.<sup>14</sup> This chapter provides the results of individual interviews and a focus group interview with this core group of four students as well as their written narratives in which they reflected on their backgrounds and experiences. The interviews and the self-reflections provided me with an understanding of how these students attached importance to and came to be leaders of this event.

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<sup>14</sup> While it was clear that one of the co-founders was the “go to” person for overall planning and implementation, she often referred to the responsibilities of the other core group members in these planning meetings, and in fact encouraged them to meet with me to discuss their roles in Cultural Fusion.

This chapter is organized according to the themes that emerged from the data collected primarily from these interviews and self-reflections, which are: (1) the needs that Cultural Fusion meets, (2) who participates in Cultural Fusion, (3) how Cultural Fusion has evolved, and (4) students' reflections about the future of Cultural Fusion. I also include responses from a survey of the larger group of students who volunteered for Cultural Fusion. By conducting this survey I sought to determine how other students became involved in this event and to acquire demographic information pertaining to their gender and ethnicity or cultural background. I also present information gained in interviews with several University program staff, one of whom works with students to continue Cultural Fusion as an event at Mason and another who provided information on new University initiatives that share some of Cultural Fusion's goals, as well as comments a graduate assistant shared with me concerning his current involvement with Cultural Fusion. Throughout my analysis of these discussions, my observations at planning meetings, and responses from the student volunteer survey, I obtained a sense of what student leadership means to Cultural Fusion's core leadership team; thus, I also include those reflections.

To provide context, I begin with an explanation of how I became involved this particular case study.

### **Case Study as Research Project**

As a graduate student in a two-course sequence on feminist research methodology, the assignment was to select a case study project that would involve research relevant to Mason and conducted on campus. While exploring research ideas

focused on female students from Afghanistan, I was introduced to Cultural Fusion when one of its female co-founders (who had previously taken the same research course) sent an email to my instructor offering Cultural Fusion as an ethnographic research site. This student believed (1) that Cultural Fusion's team members would benefit from an external, in-depth analysis and (2) that the researcher would benefit from having ready access to students involved in planning and implementing Cultural Fusion Fairfax 2010 as well as documents generated (e.g., student feedback forms, earlier years' evaluations, publicity materials, email correspondence, and event and participant photos). As the researcher, I would be welcome to attend and participate in Cultural Fusion's planning meetings and attend any of its events, and upon identifying my particular interest areas/questions, I would be enthusiastically welcomed as Cultural Fusion's ethnographer and would be introduced by email to others involved with planning and implementing Cultural Fusion.

Upon confirming with my instructor that this would be an acceptable research project for the course, I responded to the student's email invitation, introduced myself, and requested the opportunity to meet with her and others involved with Cultural Fusion. The first response I received came from the other student co-founder, who immediately agreed to schedule a time to meet with me as well as welcomed me to planning meetings and introduced me by email to other students working on the event's various committees. In total, four students—three female and one male—who were directly involved with Cultural Fusion, responded to my email request to meet with members of its student leadership. As mentioned previously, two of the female students are Cultural Fusion's co-founders. I considered this group of four to be its core based on (1) my attendance at

planning meetings and observations of who was in charge of what aspects of the event, (2) these students' willingness to meet with me over a period of time and their responses to my additional requests for information about the event, including directing me to University staff members to learn more about Cultural Fusion as my research continued. I found that the 3-to-1, female-to-male, make-up of the core team did not happen by design but because of where the interest lay. Upon indicating to Cultural Fusion's co-founders that I would welcome meeting with any student involved with the event, I received replies to my email invitation (which one of the co-founders distributed to the list of student volunteers) from only the four students referred to in this case study.

It became apparent through interviews with these four students that one woman student in particular, also a co-founder, was considered the driving force behind this event and instrumental to its future. It also became evident in my initial introduction as a researcher that women in general had a primary role in Cultural Fusion's leadership. For example, within hours after emailing my intention to pursue this case study, the female co-founder who volunteered the project sent an email to a group of 10 women (seven students and three faculty or staff who were supporting Cultural Fusion) to inform them of my interest. Shortly afterward, I received an email, which also went to the same group of 10 women, from Cultural Fusion's other co-founder indicating her interest in combining quantitative analyses of past Cultural Fusion events from feedback forms with results of ethnographic research. In other words, she clearly saw value to having such analysis become part of the event. In addition, in this email she provided data captured in the 2009 student feedback forms, which gave me an idea of what the team had analyzed

in the past and what they considered important. This included such factors as resident students' versus commuter students' participation; likely days and times when students had free time to attend events and also to volunteer; what activities students liked most; and whether students would be likely to attend more events like Cultural Fusion.

My analysis of the regular email correspondence sent out by one of the co-founders about planning for Cultural Fusion and my participant observation at several Cultural Fusion planning meetings identified a multi-tiered level of student leadership for this event. Beyond the core student leadership group, there was a larger team of 22 students, 10 of whom were women, and including one female faculty advisor. At the completion of Cultural Fusion 2010, more than 100 students (of whom more than half were women) were recognized as volunteers who assisted with one or more aspects of Cultural Fusion planning and implementation.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Needs That Cultural Fusion Meets**

According to its student leaders and its student volunteers, Cultural Fusion offers a great deal to students. It addresses cultural needs in non-judgmental ways that not are always met in the classroom, provides freedom to interact outside of designated *group spaces*, and creates opportunities to meet others, exchange ideas, and have fun. It also is a site for student leadership development and one in which students can and do reflect upon what they are able to teach others about themselves and learn about others in return.

I feel it help [sic] people see other sides of mason cultural community that is often not widely viewed or easily associated with. Since mason is diversity and cultural

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<sup>15</sup> Cultural Fusion's volunteer list contained 244 entries and included the names of more than 100 individual students, various student organizations, faculty, and staff members.

hub it is easy to get lost and caught up with a majority missing the advantages of learning about a cultural minority that still exist in the mason community. (male student volunteer, no ethnicity identified)

Another student, who identified himself as Hispanic/Latino, put it this way: “During Cultural Fusion you talk to people that you normally wouldn’t because of a number of factors.”

To understand initially what influenced student leaders to work on Cultural Fusion, I asked them in individual interviews and in a focus group interview why it is important. Specifically, I asked: What does it offer students, both those who lead it as well as those who participate? As one of the co-founders said:

I initially wanted to do something that mattered culturally at Mason because [as a former student elsewhere] I was exposed to and participated in many culturally-focused events and activities for students. ...Our focus [for Cultural Fusion] was on inclusiveness and having a bridge for students to get to know one another. We have so many different cultures represented here. I remember how much fun it was to just hang out at my community college .... We had both planned and unplanned things. There was always something going on.

This and other comments from the students I interviewed convinced me that those most closely involved in Cultural Fusion (its core student leadership) did not consciously consider whether it would appeal to one group of individuals over another, such as women versus men, and international versus non-international students. Rather, Cultural Fusion’s student leaders’ goals were to schedule and offer as many activities as possible

with the hopes that students in general (as well as others in the university community) would find something culturally interesting to experience—whether as observers, participants, or volunteers—and provide feedback.

The most important goal of Cultural Fusion, as conveyed by the students I interviewed, is to break down cultural barriers. As one student leader, a male who identifies as Hispanic and American, noted:

Because in the classroom you can talk about culture but you don't practice it. But with Cultural Fusion it allows you to practice it. It allows you to meet other people. And there's nothing really like it. When I was just thinking now about the different segregation and I think of student clubs, there's the Hispanic student association, Filipino student association, uhm, Middle Eastern student association... you know there's not one big culture association like Cultural Fusion. Cultural Fusion doesn't prohibit different cultures, ethnicities, sexual orientation; everyone falls under the same umbrellas. We're all humans so we're all in this together. ... there [are] definitely specific cultural groups and as much as they [say] you can and be a member... it's open to everyone in the Mason community... Like, I wouldn't be accepted, for example, to join the Middle Eastern Association. I could but it'd be awkward. I don't think I'd be welcome.

Another student leader explained that Cultural Fusion is an open environment where students (especially culturally-diverse students) could be themselves, ask questions without feeling weird or awkward, and generally feel comfortable. This student observed:



...with Cultural Fusion, I think it's a good thing to bring all of us together and it really does force us to look at what's really goin' on. And [it] forces us to say: "Well, there's not... we're not unified." And this month event allows us to be together even if it's for a small three hour event. It allows you to learn more about me, more about you. And we could become friends in the end.

A particular condition that concerned these student leaders, and prompted their commitment to Cultural Fusion, was an environment of self-segregation they saw at Mason. In interviews, they specifically referred to designated locations, namely but not exclusively in the Johnson (student) Center where certain groups of students would regularly meet to eat, study, speak in native languages, and socialize. They described this condition as so ingrained that it was more or less common knowledge among Mason students that *designated location* was where *certain group of students* would be at any given time. One student leader commented:

As much as the school wants to brag that we're diverse, I feel that we're very segregated. Walk into the Johnson Center. Middle Easterns, Asians, Hispanics...yes we're all in school together, but do we interact? Not as much. We're friends, yes, but our core main group we stick to each other. So with Cultural Fusion I think it's a good thing to bring all of us together and it really does force us to look at what's really going on....this month [long] event allows us to be together even if it's for a small [few] hours...it allows you to learn more about me, [and me] more about you.

Further, Mason's cultural or ethnic student associations, while valuable in that they offer space for students to identify with others like themselves, "can become 'barred rooms' that confine and constrict (and limit their effectiveness if they fail) to appreciate differences of other groups" (Bernice Johnson Reagon, as cited in Andersen & Collins, 2009, p. 515). In contrast, Cultural Fusion attempts to bring together these groups, with its table fair showcasing various student organizations and solicitation of these groups' support for the event via publicity and performances.

Cultural Fusion's student leadership employed a coalition-building strategy to bring diverse groups together to help achieve their goals of cultural awareness, inclusivity, acceptance, and understanding. Student leaders described themselves as those who facilitate, fill in when needed, solicit talent, and keep team members on task. These students also acknowledged that part of their learning experience included working in a "trial and error" atmosphere. Perhaps the most important aspect to their work, given Cultural Fusion's expansion from a one-day to four-week event, involved their ability to identify talent, interest, and initiative in their fellow students. The ability to recruit others became critical; in effect, these students were searching for other student leaders. To accomplish this, they needed to establish Cultural Fusion as significant enough for others to participate in. As one of the co-founders remarked: "When the planning team itself...started reaching out to, uhm, other student leaders to help them carry their tasks forward... [they needed to consider that to many, Cultural Fusion] has no recognition behind it." Student leaders believed that those who would consider participating would be

looking for something new and interesting—a reason to become involved in the event.

Their coalition strategy evolved from:

- gathering feedback each year from students who attended Cultural Fusion activities and using this feedback to plan future years' events (e.g., determining days/times to schedule activities and what types of activities students liked/did not like);
- conducting outreach throughout the university to engage volunteers, support, and participation (e.g., via student email and social media, and visits to university program offices, academic departments, student organizations, residence hall staff, and in 2010, local businesses);
- keeping open and regular lines of communication (mainly through email) and holding regular planning meetings where one co-founder in particular encouraged volunteers to report and get feedback and assistance from their peers; and
- accepting help from anyone who expressed an interest in helping, regardless of the amount of time one could commit.

Student leaders attributed the latter in particular to their ability to expand Cultural Fusion. Even when having to pick up the slack for duties that others could no longer attend to, these students recognized that it meant more to accept what students could offer than to turn them away. Although compromise was not one of the terms these students used, it was key to their outreach efforts to solicit additional help. They learned and came to accept that not everyone would be able to give the same level of assistance, quality of

work, or amount of time, in essence recognizing the student-led nature of the event and affording space for themselves and others to make mistakes.

Cultural Fusion's core leadership team also used the terms *fulfillment*, *celebration*, *sharing*, and *collaboration* to describe what Cultural Fusion offers. In particular, they acknowledged that the sharing (of students' cultures) aspect of the event was important to gaining understanding—an overall goal for them. They agreed that this experience alone set Cultural Fusion apart from other student experiences on campus.

One of the co-founders put it this way:

...it's about everyone wanting to celebrate themselves, their identity, and to meet other people. Then after celebration is sharing. The participation level when you are there as an international student. You're there to share your culture with somebody else, because how much do you share when you're by yourself? With another person you teach something to them, so that [there is a] fulfillment factor. And also the fact that their pride of country is being spread around and somebody's learning about something. So *fulfillment*, *celebration*, and *sharing*.

Another student leader explained Cultural Fusion's importance in terms of friendship and learning from diversity:

If it had not been for Cultural Fusion, I am not sure if she [another student leader] and I would have ever crossed paths because of the fact that we come from different backgrounds. In the end, I was glad to have walked away not only with [her] as a great friend, but others as well. Most importantly, I had the opportunity to learn about other people and their cultures, which was extremely interesting.

This understanding was also beneficial to me for my overall understanding of different people and their cultures. I hope that Cultural Fusion continues throughout the years because as much as Mason tries to integrate students together, it is not very efficient, but because Cultural Fusion is a student run program more students are more prone to become involved with it. Cultural Fusion is the only fun program that is dedicated to students and the Mason community coming together. Without, Cultural Fusion students will continue to be segregated. After all what is the point of diversity, if people are not interacting with one another?

These students' comments reflect what Bordas characterizes as cultural and multicultural leadership where "recognizing common abilities and celebrating differences are two of the touchstones of diversity" (2007, p. x). Student leaders sought to do just that with Cultural Fusion—bringing diverse individuals and groups—minority and dominant—together to acknowledge and understand similarities among differences. Their efforts are supported by comments made in response to my student volunteer survey question, "What do you think Cultural Fusion accomplishes?"

It establishes that George Mason University is a very diverse and accepting campus. We are a wonderful melting pot with many unique talents and beliefs.  
(female student of Mediterranean background)

[Cultural Fusion accomplishes] making the most of mason's diversity to enrich our life experiences. (female Hispanic student)

It creates an environment where people feel accepted regardless of their background, which allows for the free exchange of ideas in a space that explores the more fun aspects of various cultures around the world.” (female student of Indian, Singaporean, and American background)

I think it brings different cultures together to learn about and embrace each others differences. (female African American student)

I think it provides a good opportunity for students to interact in a completely different way-maybe try something out that they haven't done before. (female student who replied *no* to identifying with an ethnicity)

It creates a community atmosphere [and] brings together students who otherwise would not have contact, particularly American and international students. (female student of Turkish (primarily)/Mediterranean/Middle Eastern background)

I think it raises awareness...the event is educational and fun. (female student who replied *no* to identifying with an ethnicity)

Whether or not culturally diverse students, female or male, benefit more from experiences such as Cultural Fusion than white students, all students stand to gain if they are open to the experience. This is the essence of what student leaders hoped to accomplish with Cultural Fusion. As Cultural Fusion's student leaders demonstrated, leadership is grounded in listening, and it is the recognition and acceptance of and respect for our differences that has to be part of the picture. "To accept and respect what is different is one of those virtues without which listening cannot take place" (Freire, 2001, p. 108). As presented here, Cultural Fusion's student leaders contribute to, as hooks explains, a full commitment "to the work of transforming the academy so that it will be a place where cultural diversity informs every aspect of our learning" (1999a, p. 239). Cultural Fusion is a platform for cultural diversity. Based on comments provided in student feedback forms, some students credited Cultural Fusion with helping them become more aware of other cultures and getting to know about other groups of students at the university. Take, for example, one student's comments about Cultural Fusion's importance: "...because it helps us promote other experiences that students could have..." Such views support student leaders' comments on classroom experiences regarding cultural diversity and imply that without events such as Cultural Fusion, not only would students miss out on something of importance but the university itself stands to benefit because it puts a positive face on diversity at Mason. As another student wrote: "It's always good to see people get on well together regardless of their identities."

## **Who Participates in Cultural Fusion**

Cultural Fusion's founders noted that, in terms of feedback, their primary interest was in learning what students liked best about Cultural Fusion and what days and times they would be most likely to attend its activities. As a result, they did not collect student demographic information, such as race, ethnicity, or gender, in student feedback forms. In retrospect, they acknowledged that in the future it would be beneficial to know more about the types of students who did participate. However, each year these students maintained a list of Cultural Fusion's volunteers so they could recognize these persons and groups for their involvement. In fact, this recognition became the basis for each year's closing ceremony. The list included names of students, student organizations, faculty, staff, administrators, and community contacts. Of more than 100 students on this list, more than half were women. This demographic is consistent with current University enrollment data of 54 percent female and 46 percent male. Although earlier years' Cultural Fusion events were also dominated by women student leadership, Cultural Fusion 2010 saw an increase in male student participation, which may be attributed to the expanded nature of the event (i.e. from a one-day event to a month-long event), added publicity, and more opportunities for involvement, including more participation from student associations whose membership includes both women and men.

As one member the core leadership team explained why, as an international student, she was drawn to Cultural Fusion:

I was worried about the International students at Mason that they are not very involved on campus. I want to see more International students taking leadership



roles and responsibilities at Mason. I tried to start an International student leaders' program but this plan was unsuccessful because of my lack of experiences. I told [names one of Cultural Fusion's co-founders] my opinions and some ideas on helping the International students. [One of Cultural Fusion's co-founders] then brought up the whole concept on cultures. This new perspective totally excited me. If there were such a place where people could stop fighting over their differences but celebrating over similarities, won't that be wonderful? I took part in Cultural Fusion in order to provide Mason students a platform to see the greatness in others and celebrate all the cultures together.

My interviews with student leaders consistently revealed that Cultural Fusion appealed more to international and American minority students, and to more women than men. As one student leader noted:

I felt minority students came [to Cultural Fusion] ... more so than Caucasian students and I felt that because they want to know about different cultures and they want to really get involved. But that's my personal view, like I thought a lot more ethnic students were involved.

Another student leader reflected that, because she saw more international students than American students attending its events, that perhaps there was a misconception of what "culture" is among the two groups.

For some reason, when people talk about the word *culture* they automatically assume that it's something of another country or something of an exotic origin. So

Americans have culture, but for some reason whenever something cultural is put on paper, American students have a harder time associating with that.

Several of the student leaders also indicated that some of their white American friends confided to them that they did not have a culture. Whiteness studies can help explain why white students who, because of belonging to the dominant group, are not marginalized on the basis of race or color and for whom solidarity is not an issue. “Whites do not see themselves as having a race, but being, simply people” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 80). These students may think they do not have a culture because, as part of the dominant group, they do not need to recognize a culture that is so engrained in society. One of the co-founders gave another example of white students not relating to their culture when describing the time when a white female student emcee at one of Cultural Fusion’s events was soliciting suggestions from the audience for cultural songs, but announced that no American students need volunteer because only non-Americans have cultural songs. The female co-founder recalled how astounded she was at this comment: “I ran to take the microphone and said that no, no, no, **anyone** was welcome to come forward to sing about their culture, **anyone**.” This student continued: “This is not what Cultural Fusion is about. Everyone has culture, and Americans have so much, like music. You have rock, blues, jazz...” In this student leader’s view, music is a key part of American culture, similar to music traditions other cultures enjoy. However, to her American peer, American music traditions are “just music,” not cultural—an example of ethnocentrism and white American hegemony.

Not truly recognizing their own culture keeps these students from experiencing the benefits that diversity experiences provide. For example, in their study of the civic benefits of diversity experiences (including those that happened in the classroom, at campus multicultural events, and through intergroup dialogue), Gurin, Nagda, and Lopez (2004) found that White students' participation in such activities was positively related to the ability to take others' perspectives and to develop a sense of commonality with students of color. For both White students and students of color, diversity experiences were positively related to participation in other racial groups' activities and an ability to learn about others' cultures (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 528). Further, a lack of participation in events such as Cultural Fusion may extend to a lack of participation in other activities as well, and help to maintain the status quo that Cultural Fusion's student leaders hoped to alter.

Student leaders also recognized that an event that focuses on the diversity of cultures may not engage with students because of that focus. For example, in describing the Cultural Clothing and Photo Booth activities as the more popular of Cultural Fusion's activities, one student co-founder noted that traditionally dressed Muslim women students did not participate in this activity.<sup>16</sup> This raised the question in one of my interviews with Cultural Fusion's student leaders whether Muslim women students chose not to participate in the cultural clothing "try-on" activity because it would mean

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<sup>16</sup> Here students could try on various pieces of cultural clothing and have their photo taken while wearing the clothing. Students themselves (mostly those already involved with Cultural Fusion) donated the clothing for this purpose. This activity drew a wide range of participants, as evident in the photos that the student organizers posted on Cultural Fusion's Facebook page, some of which one of the students shared with me during an interview.

compromising their identity, which they represent to others by their clothing. The students agreed that this could be a likely explanation and said they respected other students' cultural norms and their freedom to express such. While this example reinforced these students' views that Cultural Fusion should try to continue to try to break down cultural barriers among Mason's diverse student body, they also recognized that Cultural Fusion means different things to different people, and explained it is not meant to be everything to everyone, but more a non-threatening space for bringing students together to learn more about each other.

To understand more about the role that gender may have played in Cultural Fusion, given that three of the four core student leaders were female, in my survey of the larger group of student volunteers I asked students to identify their gender and also to indicate if they had volunteered because of someone already involved with Cultural Fusion. I received responses from 22 out of 109 students—a 20 percent response rate. I found that over 70 percent of the respondents identified themselves as female, and over 60 percent attributed their decision to volunteer to someone involved with Cultural Fusion who had asked them to do so, namely one of the event's co-founders, whose name was mentioned in several responses. The following table summarizes student volunteers' responses to my survey questions that asked for certain demographic data.

Survey question	Female responses	Female ethnicity	Male responses	Male ethnicity
Are you an international student?	2		2	
Do you identify with an ethnicity? If so, which ethnicity/ethnicities?	11	Mediterranean Hispanic Indian/Singaporean/American African American (3) Asian Filipino Turkish/Mediterranean/Middle Eastern Chinese	3	Caucasian Hispanic/Latino "several"
What is your gender? <sup>17</sup>	15		6	
Did someone involved with Cultural Fusion ask you to volunteer?	10		2	

Table 2: Student volunteer responses to survey questions.

Not only as a result of these responses, but also because of the overall numbers of individual students and student organizations who participated, I attribute the female leadership of Cultural Fusion with gaining the participation of not only other female students but male students as well. Theirs is an example of a relational and collaborative leadership approach that extends from student-to-student, and that does not seek to exclude anyone who wishes to participate, and that recognizes everyone's contributions. Because of this, Cultural Fusion can also be a training ground for what today's students might come to expect in the workforce, where they will likely face a competitive and multicultural environment, working among individuals with diverse backgrounds, experiences,

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<sup>17</sup> One student who responded did not respond to this question.

and styles of leadership. I also consider that the more student participation in activities characterized by diverse leadership that is also female-dominant, such as in Cultural Fusion, can be an impetus for more representation by women and minorities in leadership positions beyond students' college careers.

### **How Cultural Fusion Evolved**

From a one-day field day event in the fall of 2008, to a one-day event with more activities in the fall of 2009, to a month-long event in the fall of 2010, Cultural Fusion's two women co-founders led its expansion effort by listening to student feedback, providing open access and communication, and eventually building a cadre of volunteers and participants. One of the non-co-founders, who became part of the core group of student leaders, explained Cultural Fusion's growth this way:

I think there was a more of a demand for Cultural Fusion. I think like it started off, at least like for me from what I saw, it started off as small minor event but then as the years went by got larger and larger, spreading to Prince William [campus]. ... so I think because it got so much bigger and so many departments were working with us now, and student orgs, there was a demand for more people to be on board as there was so much work ....

As the event grew, the make-up of those working on it also changed. Although earlier years' Cultural Fusion events were dominated by women student leadership (primarily its co-founders), student leaders said the fall 2010 event saw an increase in men's participation, which they attributed to the expanded nature of the event (i.e. from a one-day event to a month-long event), added publicity, and more opportunities for

involvement, including more participation from student associations whose membership includes both women and men. Within the second week of the Fall 2010 semester, one of the co-founders communicated in an email to an extended group of students and faculty and staff supporters the overall management structure of Cultural Fusion, outlined as follows:

1. Event Architecture (Funding, Space/Logistics, Identity, Image, Structure of month)
2. Event Operations (Volunteer/Talent Recruitment, Volunteer Information Management, Volunteer Training, Vendor Outreach, Event Execution)
3. Event Sustainability (Feedback/Sign-in teams, Historian, Web Designer, Media team [video, photos, written pieces], Constitution)

This became the blueprint that guided how the core student leadership ran Cultural Fusion's planning meetings and was also used to measure its progress. Both student co-founders and another student who is part of the core planning team were identified as the authors of the management structure. According to one of the co-founders, this framework also sought to "provide insight into recruitment for next year's team of students who will be running this event at Mason."

### **Cultural Fusion's Future**

Throughout their work on Cultural Fusion, its two co-founders told me they would remain committed to its continuity while in their roles as students. This was evident from their tenure on working on this event, from its inception in 2008 through the

fall 2010 event, including overseeing end-of-event results, such as the compilation of student participants' feedback and the celebration and recognition of its volunteers. When I first became involved in this case study, these students, along with the other members of the core leadership team, expressed concern about the future given that two of them were seniors who would soon be graduating, and one of them would be moving back to China for her final year of study. The core leaders intended that the results of their efforts to provide information on its organizational structure, as well as supporters, feedback forms, volunteer lists, and funding information would be preserved and shared with University Life staff so that students involved in Cultural Fusion's future would have a framework to guide them. And this is exactly what happened.

In the fall of 2011, Mason's Office of Diversity Services selected a male international student as Cultural Fusion's graduate assistant, who worked under the guidance of a University Life program director whose oversight includes the Cultural Fusion event.<sup>18</sup> Both the student and the program director told me that what the 2010 team left behind in terms of its overall management structure and feedback provided invaluable help for them in continuing this event. The graduate student told me he followed much of the 2010 team's publicity strategy and outreach materials in planning the 2011 event, which ran for three days and included a field day, student organization table fair, performances and activities, a cultural arts showcase, and a closing ceremony. He also explained to me that he was grateful to be able to get advice from one of the

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<sup>18</sup> The specific offices within University Life associated with Cultural Fusion are the Office of Diversity Programs and Services and the Multicultural Research and Resource Center.



event's co-founders, who is now a staff person in the Office of Diversity Services while pursuing her PhD.

In addition to wanting to leave behind a framework for Cultural Fusion's future, several of its student leaders expressed their desire to see the development of a new living/learning community at Mason focused on bringing diverse students together who would become the future leaders of not only this event but other activities and programs for students. Coincidentally, beginning in the fall of 2011, Mason added Global Crossings, a new living/learning community, to the university's existing 11 student living learning communities. While I was not able to determine whether Cultural Fusion's student leaders' discussions about the need for a global living/learning community in some way led to its development and implementation, I cannot rule out the possibility that Cultural Fusion indirectly contributed to the expansion of the living/learning program at Mason or other initiatives related to cultural awareness. According to Global Crossings' acting director, a female graduate student:

I know about Cultural Fusion and I think Global Crossings has a common goal with Cultural Fusion—integrating diversity. Both are meaningful, interactive, and fun. The difference is that Global Crossings is the extreme...it's not just a game... you're actually living together. Mason was behind the game in terms of internationally-focused living/learning communities but we know it's important. We wanted students to integrate and share cultures. [In teaching the Global Leadership course] I help them identify leadership values and resources on campus to help them become leaders in their community. In terms of cultural

influences, I think these are important especially for leadership. This semester the students are preparing proposals for an event-focused leadership project and next semester they will have to implement it. They are working in groups of 4 to 5, so learning about each other and what each of them brings to the project in terms of their backgrounds and their skills is a big part of this. I don't know if the former Cultural Fusion student leaders had a direct influence on Global Crossings but I'm glad we now have this program at Mason because of our international student population. I want them all to be leaders.

While this case study did not focus on studies of student living-learning communities or their relationship to student leadership development, a brief survey of material in this area is supportive of why several of Cultural Fusion's female student leaders expressed interest in having a community such as Global Crossings at Mason. In fact, these students were ahead of the curve in terms of their cultural sharing and awareness goals. According to Inkelas et al. (2006), living-learning programs are not only considered helpful to institutions to "document the extent to which students in these programs feel that their intellectual and cognitive abilities have grown" (p. 72), but their work also found that "L/L [living-learning program] students were statistically more likely to view their campus climates for racial/ethnic diversity as positive" (p. 63). In addition, in Inkelas et al.'s (2006) assessment of the reliability and validity evidence of the National Study of Living-Learning Programs initiative, they found that "women were more likely to interact frequently with their peers and had more positive perceptions of the campus racial climate than men did...and had statistically higher mean scores for

many of the intellectual outcomes related to the application of knowledge to other contexts—whether they were personal, philosophical, or cultural experiences” (p. 65). This study provides additional support for the role that gender can play in influencing student leadership development.

Another example I found of the connection between Cultural Fusion’s student leadership and positive change came from University program staff knowledgeable of Cultural Fusion’s student leaders’ goals, which they described as offering programs to bring students together to celebrate the university’s cultural diversity. These staff told me that in the fall of 2011 Mason instituted a monthly International Café event. As one staff person noted:

The new International Café event is a monthly event with thinking similar to Cultural Fusion. Students can taste different foods, play games, do arts and crafts. Each month features different countries. So it’s similar programming but on a smaller scale. Like Cultural Fusion it creates opportunities that offer value, more than [classroom] lectures. It’s a stop-in approach, you drop by and try something. Both staff persons credited Cultural Fusion’s success with, at a minimum, indirectly contributing to the launching of the International Café event.

### **Reflections on Cultural Fusion’s Student Leadership**

Throughout our discussions and in analyzing their self-reflections, a portrait of Cultural Fusion’s student leadership and how it was shaped emerged. Importantly, student leaders’ actions were reflective of relational leadership, cultural and multicultural leadership, and feminist leadership studies. Student leaders also demonstrated some

understanding of the goals of transformative education as discussed by Freire and hooks in Chapter 2, particularly in recognizing the challenges inherent in working within a hegemonic structure. I offer some reflections on what I observed and found in listening to these students.

Each student member of Cultural Fusion's leadership team displayed collaboration and cooperation skills at planning meetings I attended. Both skill areas are considered effective tools in relational leadership studies. Collaboration is one of the processes Komives, Lucas and McMahon (2007) cite that contribute to relational and ethical leadership whereby positive change is communicated to all members of the group, also referred to as "meaning making" (p. 104). In addition, being able to work collaboratively is a key outcome and one of the critical values Dugan et al. (2008) identify as necessary to effect change.

Although compromise was not one of the terms these students used in my meetings with them, it was key to their outreach efforts to solicit additional help. They learned and came to accept that not everyone would be able to give the same level of assistance, quality of work, or amount of time, in essence recognizing the student-led nature of the event and affording space for themselves and others to make mistakes. As one of the event co-founders reflected: "...the more we grew the more we realized that we can't turn people away...we have to open it up to everyone. So we did open it up...whatever people were able to finish, we took that. And we gave them credit."

How and what student leaders communicated about Cultural Fusion also provided insights about its student leadership. When one of the co-founders was asked to provide

an entry written in first person for the Innovation Inventory, a university website chronicling innovative events/programs at Mason, she replied that doing so "...is more complicated than just me writing a blurb.... I do not think it would be fair to all those who have helped make the event happen if their voice [sic] is not allowed to be a part of the Innovation Inventory." Not only does this thinking support leadership-related outcomes, such as multicultural awareness, commitment, collaboration, and common purpose, it reflects contemporary approaches to leadership, as discussed in Chapter 2. Furthermore, this thinking fits well within feminist theory wherein knowledge is created by more than one individual and is inclusive in terms of its contributions. According to Reinharz, this is also reflective of feminist ethnography—the conceptualization of women’s experience within their context.

Additionally, my analysis of Cultural Fusion student leaders’ self-portraits provides additional insight on how their backgrounds and experiences influenced their commitment to, and subsequent leadership of, this event. For example, one of Cultural Fusion’s co-founders felt the need to initially hide her involvement in the event from her parents because of their belief that her university time should be focused on schoolwork. For this student, her parents’ beliefs are anchored in Indian culture and its emphasis on higher education for young people—many are strongly encouraged to pursue education and training in science and technology fields, as this student did. It was not until Cultural Fusion was awarded the Top Honors Award for University Life in 2009 did this student feel she could finally admit her role in this event to her family.

Another of Cultural Fusion’s co-founders expressed herself not only by culture and ethnicity but also in terms of her interests, dreams, and goals. In an actual self-portrait she depicted herself with the one eye as the Turkish flag and the other as the American flag and with a mouth that speaks poetry, surrounded by words and images of significance to her. At the bottom is this quotation from Martin Luther King, Jr.: “Men often hate each other because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don’t know each other; they don’t know each other because they cannot communicate; they cannot communicate because they are separated.” In addition to portraying her own identity, this self-portrait illustrated her desire to use her culturally diverse heritage to work for understanding about diversity.

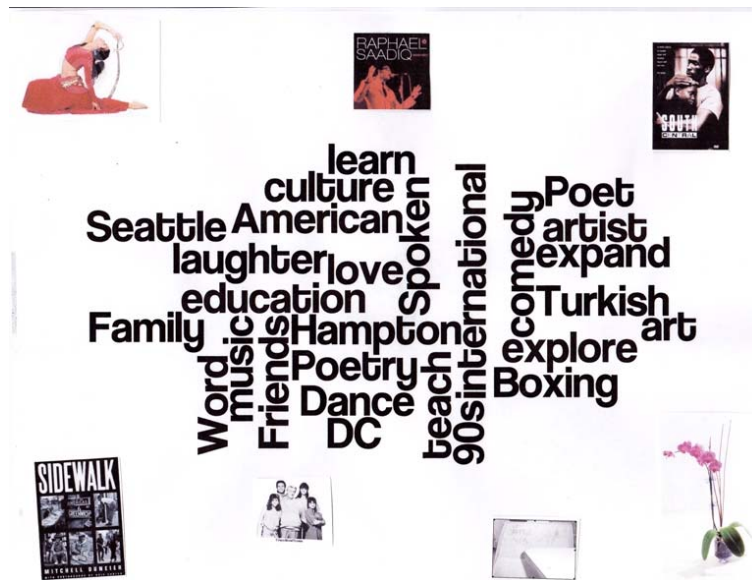


Figure 4. Excerpt from a student self-portrait.

Another student leader's self-reflection focused specifically on her Chinese heritage and how that has contributed to her goals and dreams:

I am a Chinese, as you already know. My dream has been changing the educational system in China. This dream has been there for a long long time. I kinda have switched my goal to being an educator. I hope my students could be nice, righteous, and tolerant people. I also hope they can be the force to make changes to China or even the world.

Still another student leader's self-reflection contained a more global perspective on diversity, its drawbacks, and its advantages:

I chose to become involved with Cultural Fusion because I saw that there was a demand for other students from different countries, backgrounds, cultures, and ethnicity's [sic] to come together. I noticed that since I enrolled at Mason that the school prides itself for being diverse and while it is, a lot of the students on campus surround themselves with other individuals that are of their same ethnicity, background, and/or sexual orientation. This fact alone alarmed me because how can we have such a large and diverse school as Mason, and not have any of the students interact with each other? This is something I am certainly not used to because where I grew up in Newark, New Jersey everyone interacts with one another – Brazilians, Ecuadorians, Portuguese, Caucasians, and African American's, and so on. When [one of the co-founders] of Cultural Fusion, came to me with the idea of becoming involved in the program, I immediately said yes because I believe it is important for other cultures to learn about others especially

an age where, for example, Middle Eastern's are believed to be terrorists and where states are instating tough immigration laws targeting the Hispanic community – it is important that the level of ignorance that individuals have towards other people be significantly reduced so that we can all come together as people before anything.

Together, these reflections have much in common with feminist theory and multicultural leadership studies. As discussed in Chapter 2, from multicultural feminist studies we know it is never one but multiple stories that need to be told and understood, and differences, according to Mohanty, are never just differences (2003). In their individual ways, these self-reflections also show how students consider a university as a site for cultural communities and how student leadership can make an impact by embracing diversity and recognizing its contributions. In this way, we see students' *spirit* of leadership lived—a characterization Bordas (2007) ascribes to the cultural leadership within native Indian communities.

Cultural Fusion is not only what the student gets out of it in terms of personal satisfaction but also what cultural perceptions it can help change. One of the ways to educate individuals about stereotypes and learn how to adjust their perceptions is to “have opportunities to practice interacting with people who are different from them” (Kellerman et al., 2007, p. 397). The student leaders I interviewed saw Cultural Fusion as an antidote to the classroom, which they portrayed as a rigid, hierarchical environment, with an entirely different evaluation component—and one linked to academic performance and achievement. In addition, one might expect that students' behavior



might be different in the classroom versus in extra-curricular settings. Although both environments offer opportunity for collaboration among students, particularly projects including both international and American students, the classroom can lead to international students feeling like “charity cases.” One of Cultural Fusion’s student leaders provided one such classroom scenario.

People are like: “Oh, let’s do a project that involved an international student and an American student.” And it just becomes us being babied or having a buddy system where the American student is supposed to help us out. We don’t feel like we’re collaborating [then because] you don’t consider each of the stakeholders in equal proportions.

This female student leader went on to explain that it is not that international students are not interested in “buddying up,” but that the chances for a successful project are better when the stakeholders are considered equally and for there to be a realization of what each party can contribute. “It’s really interesting to consider that people don’t want what you want them to want.”

Here, she was referring to white American students who are encouraged by instructors to take international students under their wings for assigned group projects. And while students acknowledged that the administration offers many programs aimed to assist with international student adjustment to life on campus, this student insisted that “the adjustment should not come just as an Americanization or as an imposition of, like, a certain set of values over others. It’s more than about helping people adjust, it’s about working with them...it’s like a different kind of handshake.” In addition to this example’s

relationship to white privilege, it is an example of how Cultural Fusion's student leaders are responding, in their own way, to what Freire calls "the learner's critical reflection on the social, economic, and cultural conditions within which education occurs" (Freire, 2001, p. 12).

Within the Latina/o, Native American, and African American cultures, leadership flows from a cultural, familial, and community focus on the "we" as opposed to the "I" in society. (Bordas, 2007) The findings here show that Cultural Fusion's student leaders valued community opinions and actions, not in place of the individual but rather to integrate individual goals with those of the community. This type of leadership also helps maintain the group's identity by way of "collective programming," or seeing culture as the lens through which a group of individuals define their reality.

### **Summary**

By initiating Cultural Fusion, developing it from a one-day to month-long event, and providing some structure for its future, Cultural Fusion's two women co-founders turned an idea into reality. Cultural Fusion is the result of their actions based on a perceived need, and it illustrates a main tenet of student leadership—positive change by collaborative effort. The positive change associated with Cultural Fusion also extends to the efforts of one of its co-founders to share the ideas and outcomes of the event with a researcher for analytical purposes. Beyond the creation of this event and the interest displayed in offering it as a research site, these student leaders also discussed and shared with others, including me, their ideas for expanding the goals of Cultural Fusion in other ways.

Cultural Fusion exemplified the way student leadership can provide a forum for further study. Specifically, the students' work shows that leadership qualities may be flexible according to context, e.g., in this case a university setting provides opportunities for "trying-on" (to borrow Cultural Fusion's cultural clothing event description) leadership qualities, and the multicultural nature of the event itself may have contributed to how its student leaders undertook their responsibilities. While Cultural Fusion's student leadership was primarily female, it was not characterized by so-called stereotypical feminine leadership styles. For example, in planning meetings one female co-founder consistently delegated and problem-solved—two take-charge behaviors often associated with men. This same female student also exhibited other qualities, such as acknowledging and listening to others, and all of the student leaders were inclusive in terms of welcoming anyone who wished to work on the event—inclusiveness often being a quality associated with feminist approaches to leadership. What mattered was that the leadership exhibited by these students expressed the community-building nature of the event, where those who led, who volunteered, and who attended were listened to and respected. Everyone had the opportunity to share in the process and be recognized for their efforts. These are the ingredients of relational leadership, as Komives et al.(2007) teach us and also reflect Bordas' (2007) multicultural leadership approaches.

Cultural Fusion then provides evidence of student leadership development that embodies cultural and multicultural leadership and women's leadership, and that is an example of relational leadership in practice. From its leadership to how it connects (or not) with students, Cultural Fusion provides a site for analyzing how student leadership

development can be seen through the interconnectedness of transformative educational practice, critical race theory, whiteness studies, and feminist approaches to leadership, including cultural and multicultural leadership—in much the same way issues related to gender, race and ethnicity, culture, class, etc. are interconnected. To truly achieve one of the main goals of Cultural Fusion—giving meaning to diversity—one needs to recognize the role of race, especially since whiteness permeates the structure in which Cultural Fusion lives. Cultural Fusion student leaders see not only the cultural differences but the color or race divides as well.

In Chapter 5, I summarize the overall case study and offer some concluding thoughts.

## CHAPTER 5 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this case study I sought to determine: (1) whether and how culture and gender factors influenced this group of culturally diverse students' participation in Cultural Fusion—as an example of a major university extra-curricular/non-academic event; (2) how culturally diverse student leadership can effect change; and (3) what a qualitative-based study that focuses on students' personal experiences and backgrounds can add to overall college student development research.

“Recognizing common abilities and celebrating differences are two of the touchstones of diversity” (Bordas, 2007, p. x). If one lesson can be gained from what Cultural Fusion's student leaders contribute to a discussion on student leadership development, it is that student communities of color can offer insight into what may be lacking in diverse university environment and can promote ways to address such shortcomings outside of the classroom experience. By creating an informal environment to share cultural games, performances, food, and clothing, these student leaders recognized a need to bridge cultural barriers they observed in the classroom or elsewhere in the university. In addition, these students had a goal of leaving a legacy so that others who followed them could benefit from their work and feedback in planning future such events.

Cultural Fusion's student leaders expressed their "spirit of leadership" through both their individual and collective identities. As they shared with me in self-reflections and in interviews, as individuals they are influenced by their family backgrounds and upbringings that emphasized culture. As students, they recognize that they belong collectively to the greater student community of color at Mason.

Through my research I sought findings related to culture and gender influences on student leadership, and in particular the leadership of culturally diverse students. I chose a feminist methodology to add others' voices to enrich my research with feelings and emotion that are part of the human experience, which quantitative measures often lack. As the population of student communities of color increase on U.S. campuses, it is important to recognize these students as part of the student leadership development equation. More often than not, student leadership leads to or is undertaken for the express purpose of initiating change for the benefit of other students. Cultural Fusion as a case study may provide a platform for student communities of color and their working relationships in leadership capacities, as well as shed light on how student leaders' efforts impact the greater university community.

### **Culture and Gender Influences**

Through my analysis of Cultural Fusion's student leadership's expressed goals for this event and the cultural and, in some cases, gendered influences that drew them to work on Cultural Fusion, they each understood that offering this event could, among other things, provide space for social change within the university. Not finding the inclusive environment they sought in the classroom nor in separate student organizations

or other university activities, they developed Cultural Fusion as the space for accommodating what the other spaces could or would not—a space to be freely accepted for who one is, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, or culture and not meant to feel inferior in the eyes of others, which in my estimation is a mostly white American university population. This speaks to Andersen and Collins (2009) when they state that “one important component of an intersectional framework is that it fosters social justice...more just social relations” (p. 9). Cultural Fusion’s student leadership recognizes the importance of shifting the center of thinking from how the dominant group—white—experiences university life to those in the minority, perhaps because they themselves are the minority. Given their work with Cultural Fusion, these students understand that “shifting the center means acknowledging the diverse histories, cultures, and experiences of groups who have been defined as marginal in society—what we have come to think of as valuing diversity” (Andersen and Collins, 2009, p. 16).

By creating space through Cultural Fusion for diverse students to feel included, visible, and accepted on their terms, Cultural Fusion’s student leadership’s efforts contributed to a greater awareness within the student community of color as well as within the dominant group—white American students. These student leaders helped students learn how they are connected to other students, by recognizing the factors that differentiate one student from another and also what experiences make them similar, thus understanding and countering what it means to be the other, as Andersen and Collins (2009) describe:

Being the other means feeling different; is awareness of being distinct; is conscious of being dissimilar. It means being outside of the game, outside of the circle, outside of the set. It means being on the edges, on the margins, on the periphery. Otherness means feeling excluded, closed out, precluded, even disdained or scorned. It produces a sense of isolation, of apartness, of disconnectedness, of alienation (p.24).

Such a description may help explain why some students at Mason find safety and comfort in identifying with and physically grouping with like others in various spaces on campus, such as in specific locations within the student center. Yet these students' apparent need to hang out with like students acts to separate them from the larger student community and bring more attention to *otherness*. Each of Cultural Fusion's student leaders viewed these examples of self-segregation as a negative feature of diversity—the opposite of what they envisioned for Cultural Fusion, creating an environment where all could feel welcome. Too, student leaders' comments about identity-based student associations at Mason raise a question about whether such groups promote diversity and cultivate inclusion, in concert with the university's stated goals, or do they create safe spaces for certain groups and foster some degree of separateness? To Cultural Fusion's student leaders, solely being a student on a diverse college campus is not enough.

Culture and gender influences played varying, but positive, roles in student leadership development in this case study. As reflected in interviews and their self-portraits, Cultural Fusion's student leaders are truly cognizant of how leadership goes beyond the day-to-day efforts for a particular event to a simultaneous awareness of and



focus on the “what’s next?” both in terms of this event’s future and lessons learned for others to consider for other events or even practices in the classroom. Their actions also respond to what some U.S. university administrators worry about—that “as more [international and culturally diverse] students enroll and build their own communities, they might miss out on key parts of the American college experience” (Johnson, 2011, p. B-2). So, too, non-minority American students also miss out on fully experiencing and participating in the college campus microcosm of today’s global society, of which they already are members.

### **Addressing Race**

Education and changing perceptions about stereotypes should come from taking advantage of opportunities to interact with others unlike ourselves, whether by gender, ethnic identity, race, or class to name a few. The findings from this case study illustrate that Cultural Fusion provides such an opportunity, due to the stewardship of its student leadership. From its beginning, to offering this event and access to those who run it as an ethnographic research site, Cultural Fusion’s student leaders proved their commitment to a project they believed in and wanted others to learn from. These students have placed a high value on diversity in Cultural Fusion, through which they adopted an inclusive culture in terms of its volunteer base, attendees, and university and community supporters, and recognized volunteer efforts and contributions. This case study is also evidence that, given the diverse make-up of today’s college campuses, gender and culture influences on student leadership development are sites for further research opportunity—for college student development in general but also for college student leadership

development, as well as for more feminist research directed toward cultural and multicultural leadership.

Cultural Fusion is a site where learned notions of *whiteness* and *other* can be deconstructed to better understand the meaning of race and culture, both dominant and non-dominant. As previously discussed, critical race theory and whiteness studies provide a framework for looking at why white American students indicated they did not have a culture, and thought perhaps they did not need one. But we cannot rely solely on course instruction or classroom atmosphere to achieve this understanding, as the students in this case study remind us. As members of student communities of color they face every day the differences among themselves and their white peers in a white-dominated university environment. To them, whiteness is clearly visible. In contrast, by not recognizing their whiteness, or race, as part of their culture, white students seemingly accept that they are members of a majority whose identity and authority is not questioned; it is simply taken for granted. What events like Cultural Fusion offer students is the opportunity to re-learn who they are in relation to others, by sharing the totality of their selves (race, ethnicity, culture, gender) in an environment that strives to be welcoming to all. One thing that Cultural Fusion teaches is that today's students need to define for themselves what whiteness as a culture is, rather than what has been defined for them. What better example of the positive change that can stem from student leadership?

### **Raising Awareness and Effecting Change**

To lead and to effect change, we have to have the opportunity to learn from each other. What we bring by virtue of our gender and culture help define who we are in any

context. We cannot recognize this in ourselves and ignore it in others. Cultural Fusion's student leadership is an example of what can happen when diversity is given the opportunity to matter and to be put in practice in a learning environment. Cultural Fusions is an example of what student leaders can accomplish because they recognize the need to work on "how things can be better than they used to be" and what we should be focusing on, in recognition of the growing diversity where they are and throughout the U.S. They also know, to borrow from Berger (2000), that others' cultures should not be extraneous to American culture.

As Andersen and Collins note, "most people who engage in social activism are ordinary, everyday people who decide to take action about something that touches their lives" (2009, p. 511). Clearly, Cultural Fusion touched the lives of its student leadership, from early development by its co-founders to the core leadership group's undertaking of such an expansive interpretation of the event in 2010. As a way to enhance all Mason students' university experience, Cultural Fusion's student leadership created an event to provide what they determined was missing—a space where, in the larger university community, all students could be comfortable in sharing their identities, and truly engage with and learn about others.

If student leadership development opportunities could be replicated and expanded so more students could envision themselves as leaders, or at least gain leadership experience, could not their efforts serve as space for privileging others and lessen the power associated with white privilege? Cultural Fusion's student leadership see what passes for leadership in the classroom, so in the non-classroom environment, have a

chance to enact and explore leadership on other, more collective terms, as influenced by culture and gender, but also by their experiences in a white-privileged setting.

This case study provides certain students' reflections on what it means to be culturally diverse in today's college classroom environment. Who better to impact what is or is not encountered in the classroom—by practice outside of it—than those who are the primary recipients of that classroom experience? Cultural Fusion is a vehicle for the multicultural educational experience that students find lacking in the classroom, and can be a vehicle to raise awareness on a larger scale. Cultural Fusion, as an example of a non-classroom but nevertheless educational event, creates a space for different voices to be heard, cultures to be de-mystified, understanding to occur, even friendships to be made. For those students who provided its leadership, they not only embrace diversity, they challenge others to embrace it as well.

There is both a certain freedom and a challenge associated with events such as Cultural Fusion. Yes, it gives culturally-diverse students a chance to be themselves with others also recognized as different—a type of freedom that may not easily exist in the classroom. Without such non-classroom opportunities, Cultural Fusion student leaders recognize that the rewards of being a member of a diverse educational community are limited, and a loss for all. But it also reflective of, as hooks described, the 'two different worlds syndrome' she felt in her college years at Stanford: "Those of us from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds learned that no aspect of our vernacular culture could be voiced in elite settings. This was especially the case with vernacular language or a first language that was not English" (hooks, 1994, p. 182). W. E. B. Du Bois's idea of double

consciousness also exemplifies this “‘two-ness’ of being” (Bruce Jr., 1992, p. 299), that one can experience as a member of more than one community. Whereas Du Bois speaks to the “internal conflict in the African American individual between what was ‘African’ and what was ‘American’” (p. 301), for Cultural Fusion’s student leaders the concern is being members of a minority student community of color within a white dominant university.

Cultural Fusion’s student leadership has shown that it is not enough to have a culturally-diverse student body because that in itself does not make the community aware of what each member can contribute. Their very awareness of the separateness that can occur when diverse groups are present provided these students with a challenge—to break down cultural barriers and learn something, anything, about Mason’s culturally-diverse student body. Their efforts were most definitely influenced by their identities as they drew from their backgrounds and experiences to work with and involve others in a university event that they initiated, expanded, and planned for its continuation. Effecting change is part of who they are and where they came from; a daunting mission given that they are non-white and therefore not of the dominant group whose methods are taken for granted and whose culture is often blended into white racial identity and hegemony.

### **What Can Cultural Fusion Add to College Student Development Scholarship?**

This case study brings attention to individual student voices about what is important to them. In putting together one event, on one college campus, students face important considerations—their own cultural and racial/ethnic make-up and those of whom they interact with, and the racial/ethnic hegemony in which they find themselves.

Somehow they have to marry these to accomplish their goals and sort out their identities, now and in their futures. The experiences of those who strive to become leaders contribute to our understanding of what student leadership development is about, and in this case study, culturally-diverse student leadership. The context of their experiences is important because it represents a microcosm of the world, in this case one where white society is dominant.

Student leadership development is an area for continued study. Scholarship is emerging on students' capacity for leadership as well as how such leadership should be defined. In addition, scholars are asserting "...that institutions have a responsibility to position leadership as a central component of student learning" (Dugan, 2008, p. 488). Two areas of student leadership development worthy to explore as they relate to Cultural Fusion are (1) how culture and social identity can influence students' understanding and approach to leadership, and (2) how social responsibility and creating change are connected to student leadership.

The social change model of leadership development was designed specifically for college students and is credited with influencing collegiate leadership programs nationwide (Dugan, 2008). This model emphasizes increasing the student leader's level of self-knowledge and her/his ability to work collaboratively. Cultural Fusion's student leaders seem to fit well within this description. As one of the co-founders explained:

So there's a lot of collaboration going on. So maybe you're not the loud, extroverted person. Here's an environment where you get to be yourself and also break down any barriers you have or weirdness or awkwardness. [Like/for

example] “So why do wear whatever?” or “Why do you not wear whatever?” or “Why do you write like that [meaning left-handed]?” So all those questions that you don’t dare ask, it’s okay to come forward and say “It’s okay to ask this.” And if they get offended, apologize. And it’s okay. So it’s an openness...

Further, as they expressed it, creating a space for learning and changing perceptions of what diversity of culture means is a goal of Cultural Fusion’s student leaders. Cultural Fusion’s student leadership is representative of the type of multicultural leadership that seems lacking in mainstream America. We need this type of leadership. College campuses are one site where this kind of leadership can be developed and nurtured, especially as these become increasingly diverse in terms of student populations. Who better to acquire multicultural competencies to work effectively with different groups than university students, especially those who are influenced and inspired by their cultural backgrounds and experiences?

To be relevant and effective, leaders must be in sync with the pulse of their times. Therefore, it follows that, given the powerful influence diversity will have in defining the twenty-first century, those who step up to leadership today must also answer the call to multicultural leadership (Bordas, 2007, p. 185).

## **Conclusion**

Cultural Fusion’s student leaders draw on the positive aspects of culture as a way to share students’ identities and create a basis for increased awareness and understanding for those who wish to participate. Cultural Fusion becomes a place for learning, in a

different way from the classroom environments (which students described as formal, authority-driven, closed). Each member of Cultural Fusion's core leadership expressed at least part of their identity in terms of culture or ethnicity (international, Asian, Hispanic, Turkish-American), establishing its importance in their minds and in mine. Their efforts to recruit, welcome, and showcase other students' cultures, whether individually or by student organization, were realized in the tremendous participation they had throughout the fall 2010 event. In my survey of the students who contributed to Cultural Fusion, the majority (14 of 21 students who responded) identified with their culture and/or ethnicity.

Because of the extent of women students' leadership throughout all phases of this event, I believe that not only culture, but also gender, influenced their participation in Cultural Fusion. Mason is a community made up of increasing numbers of students who identify with one or more ethnicities and a small but recognizable population of international students. While Cultural Fusion's student leaders recognize that various student organizations, acknowledging various national identities, exist as pieces of this community, they see a need to create a non-threatening space for bringing these various groups and identities together. Their awareness of groups of students who self-segregate—especially in the University's Johnson Center—was one of their motivations for Cultural Fusion. Their awareness and its resulting motivation further support the recognition “that the institution of gender is constructed within the context of ‘culture’ and that the two are very closely linked...” (Tamale, 2008, p. 54). The importance these students attach to increasing cultural awareness and understanding within their



community also reflects the work of feminists who see similar cultural awareness and understanding as a means to achieving social transformation (Anzaldúa, Mohanty).

As actors within this environment, the student leaders I interviewed and got to know recognized what Freire holds:

that a humanized society requires cultural freedom, the ability of the individual to choose values and rules of conduct that violate conventional social norms, and, in political and civil society, requires the full participation of *all* of its inhabitants in every aspect of public life (as cited by Stanley Aronowitz in Freire, 2001, p. 19).

Like Mohanty, Cultural Fusion's student leaders also recognize that "...differences are never just 'differences.' The challenge is to see how differences allow us to explain the connections and border crossings better and more accurately, how specifying difference allows us to theorize universal concerns more fully" (Mohanty, 2003, p. 226). Their concern for those of different cultural communities and identities is expressed in how they created and grew Cultural Fusion. Creating space for awareness and understanding equate to, in Mohanty's words, "...build[ing] coalitions and solidarities across borders" (ibid). At Mason, the students experience cultural borders daily—in and out of classrooms, student centers, dining areas, labs, libraries, recreational spaces. These spaces do not purposely set out to cultivate cultural awareness or even welcome it; whereas the space created by Cultural Fusion purposely means to collaborate, share, and celebrate cultural diversity. In this way, Cultural Fusion's leaders recognize that the larger, global community is divided by place, identity, class, and belief

system. It represents a space in which to build alliances even while it means different things to those who participate in it. But its student leaders know, like Mohanty, that “The differences and borders of each of our identities connect us to each other, more than they sever” (Mohanty, 2006, pp. 250-251).

## APPENDIX

### Email script and questionnaire for Cultural Fusion student volunteers

Dear student,

My name is Jennifer Maloney and I am a graduate student in the Women and Gender Studies program. For my thesis work, I am conducting an ethnographic case study of Cultural Fusion with particular interest in student leadership development and influences of gender and culture. I have obtained your name from a listing of students who volunteered with Cultural Fusion 2010. As a volunteer, your input is greatly appreciated. Through responses to a short survey I hope to learn more about the types of students who volunteered for this event. The survey consists of nine short questions, half of which are demographic in nature.

Below you will find a consent form and the link to the survey. Choosing to participate in the survey indicates your consent to participate in this research.

Please know that your confidentiality will be maintained throughout this research.

Thank you in advance for agreeing to participate in this short survey about your involvement in Cultural Fusion 2010. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at [jmaloney@gmu.edu](mailto:jmaloney@gmu.edu).<sup>19</sup>

**Survey Monkey questionnaire for Cultural Fusion student volunteers who have consented to participate in the survey**

Questions 1-5 are specifically related to Cultural Fusion.

1. Was the Fall 2010 event your first time volunteering with Cultural Fusion?
  - a. yes
  - b. no
  
2. How did you decide to volunteer for Cultural Fusion?
  - a. Someone involved with Cultural Fusion asked me to volunteer.
  - b. Someone not involved with Cultural Fusion asked me to volunteer.
  - c. I volunteered on my own.
  
3. Why did you decide to volunteer?
  
4. What do you think Cultural Fusion accomplishes?
  
5. Would you volunteer for Cultural Fusion again?
  - a. yes
  - b. no

Questions 6-9 are for demographic purposes.

6. Are you an international student?
  - a. yes
  - b. no
  
7. Do you identify with an ethnicity?
  - a. yes
  - b. no
  
8. If you answered yes to question 7, which ethnicity or ethnicities do you identify with?

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<sup>19</sup> Current student email address is [jmaloney@masonlive.gmu.edu](mailto:jmaloney@masonlive.gmu.edu).

9. What is your gender?
  - a. female
  - b. male

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

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